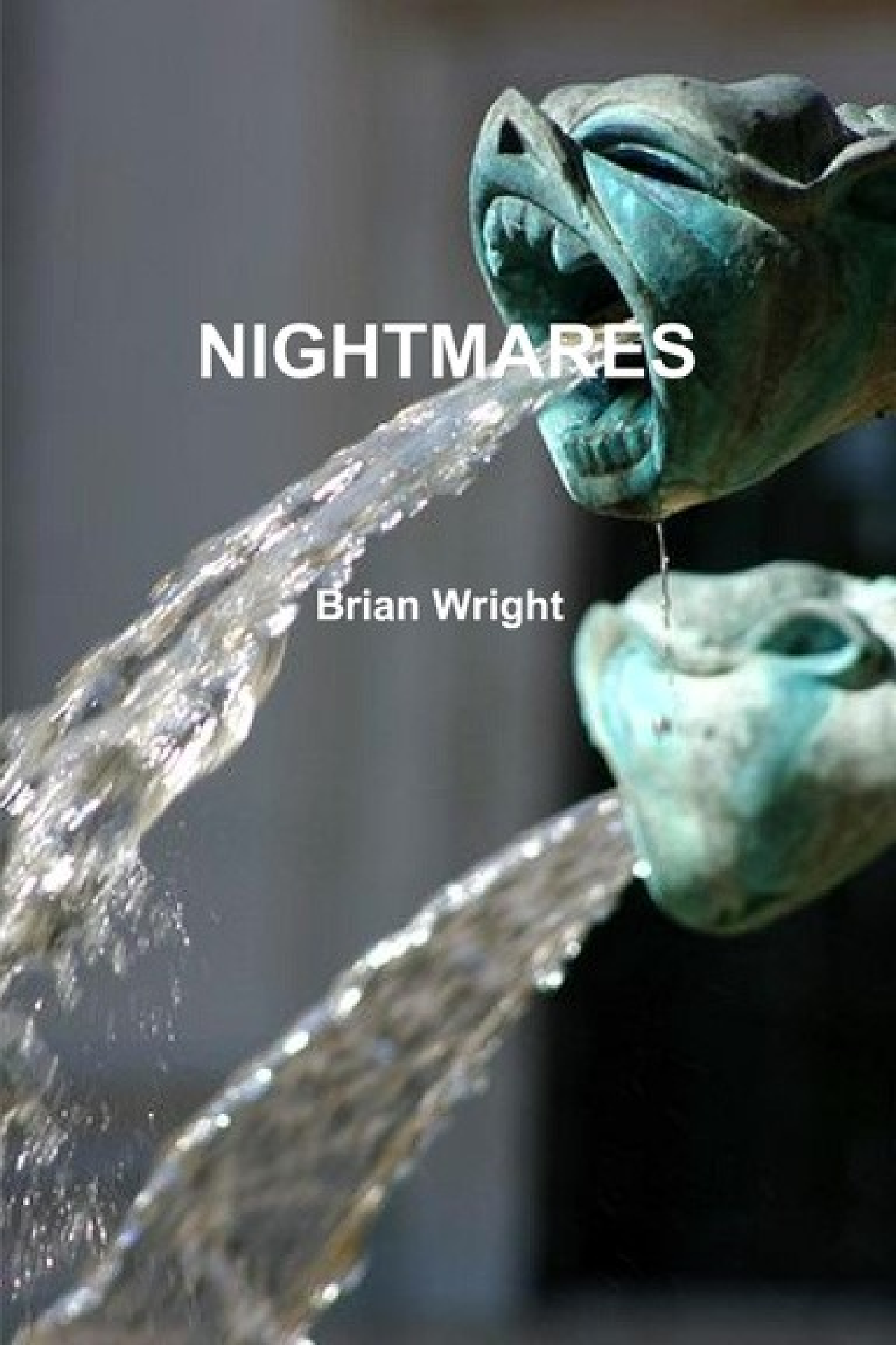
NIGHTMARES
Brian Wright

NIGHTMARES

BRIAN WRIGHT

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PUBLICITY

They were sitting in what the sales brochure had called the public drawing room. The name fitted the space perfectly. An ox could have been roasted in the stone fireplace, and her most recent ex–husband had once joked that he needed binoculars to see out of the window from his armchair.

'You're mumbling again,' she reproved.

'I'm sorry, Mandi,' Angela said.

Mandi waved her shapely hand dismissively. 'Anyway, I've heard enough. How many chapters to go?'

'Four.'

'You remember you've only got another six days? The launch party is already arranged.'

'Yes, Mandi.'

'And you're using the name I suggested?'

'Hell's Angel? Of course.'

Mandi laughed. 'And they say I don't have any input to my novels!'

As she watched the woman drive off past the tennis court, Mandi couldn't keep the smirk off her perma–tanned features. It was funny in more ways than one that she had only got to know Angela because of the gorgeous Glen. In fact, it was at their first consultation that he'd mentioned having a wife who wrote books.

If the woman only knew the truth! Anyway, it was all her fault for being such a frump. Worse still, a frump who was married to a bit of a hunk. Mandi had never been able to resist muscles and brains in the same package

She looked at the clock over the big fireplace. They were meeting in town, her Chelsea apartment, around seven. It was their first date. He'd told Angela he was doing a couple of last–minute ops. She giggled. He'd be operating alright!

That evening she made Glen's toned body live up to its promise, twice, before they sprawled on the badly crumpled silk sheets drinking the champagne he had brought. He couldn't take his eyes off her; it was only what she expected from her lovers.

But then he said, 'I have to leave.'

She stared at him, amazed. 'Do you realise how many men would pay a fortune to be here, in your position?'

He looked miserable. 'I know. But it's Angela. She'll be ringing soon to find out where I am. You have no idea how possessive she is.'

At the door, he pleaded with her. 'You will see me again, won't you? In spite of ...'

The worry in his eyes gave her a buzz. 'I don't know. I'm not used to being stood up for another woman. Even a wife.'

PUBLICITY

‘But what can I do?’

‘That’s not for me to say.’

She closed the door in his face. The perfect parting shot, she thought. Give him something to think about on his miserable way home. Sooner or later, she expected only one outcome. Both her ex–husbands had divorced someone else to be with her.

She glanced at her watch. Only just gone eleven. Well, the ungrateful bastard wasn’t going to spoil *her* evening. Who could she get to take her to that cool new club in Covent Garden? There were more than enough candidates. She reached for her mobile.

She kept Glen dangling for more than a week. With her new line of perfume really beginning to take off, she was anyway far too busy to reply to his frantic texts. Then there were all the celeb parties she had to attend and hungry paparazzi who wanted feeding. She couldn’t let her public down.

It seemed appropriate to put him out of his misery on the day that Angela was coming to the house to read her the last four chapters of her novel.

In the morning, she texted, ‘Friday, seven o’clock. My flat. Be there or you’re out for good.’ It would serve him right if he had to put off some fat society woman who wanted a tummytuck in a vain attempt to make herself more desirable.

She couldn’t resist taunting Angela.

‘How’s that delicious husband of yours?’

The woman seemed even more flustered than usual.

‘Fi – he’s fine.’

Mandi studied her. ‘I still can’t get over it, you know, the way you don’t take advantage of the fact you’re married to one of the best plastic surgeons in London.’

She thrust out her magnificent chest, while staring meaningfully at the pendulous droop in front of her. ‘Look what he did for me!’

She was used to Angela taking her barbs with a tight little smile and nothing more, so it came as a major shock when the woman snapped back. ‘Yes, well, we don’t all want to be perfect.’

Mandi wanted to strike her. Instead she put all her venom into her voice. ‘More’s the pity in some cases.’

Angela immediately subsided. ‘I’m sorry, Mandi. It’s just been one of those days.’

Mandi was still seething but decided to bide her time. Friday would merely be the start of her revenge.

PUBLICITY

She phoned her publisher when the reading was over. ‘I’ve finished it, babe. Launch party, here we come!’

Then she gave Angela the sort of smile she normally reserved for A–listers. ‘I’ll be in touch when I come up with another plot.’

Angela looked relieved that there was no lasting damage between them. I should add acting to all my other talents, Mandi thought.

On Friday Glen made it clear that he had no intention of leaving early.

‘I’ve told her I’m having a stag night, we’re out of touch until the early hours.’

‘Aren’t you clever?’

Mandi made an admiring O with her generous mouth; she knew the effect it had on men. With Glen practically romping around her ankles, she decided it was time to strike. Another pout to set the ball rolling.

‘But don’t you hate sneaking around like this, though? Kind of hiding away from people.’

There was instant contrition in the puppy dog eyes. ‘I know, sweetheart.’

‘I would just *love* to show you off, you hunk. And it can’t be nice seeing me out on the town with other men.’ She touched his arm. ‘Especially when you know I would much rather be with you.’

He nodded abjectly but remained silent.

She gave one of the rueful but alluring smiles she’d been practicing in the mirror.

‘Never mind. Can’t be helped.’ A sad little shrug. ‘I’m sorry, Glen, but I’m just not in the mood any more ...’

Minutes later, she watched as he emerged into the street. Now there is a man so frustrated he could just about *burst*, she thought with satisfaction. She made a quick phone call and then rushed to get changed into something fit for partying.

In spite of her hangover, she was in conference with her management team and some TV execs the next day, discussing her forthcoming reality series. In a break in the meeting, she checked her missed calls. Several from Glen. She kept him waiting a couple more hours and then rang from her chauffeur–driven car on the way home. She had a good idea what he was going to say.

She was right. ‘I’ve told her it’s over.’

‘You told her about me?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did she take it?’

‘Not well, I’m afraid.’

‘You bad, bad man!’

She was about to giggle when she heard him sigh. Instead she made her voice serious. ‘It’s a shame, Glen, and I can tell you’re upset. But you know there was no other way.’

He sounded as if he wanted to cry. ‘I know.’

‘Are you sure you want to be with me, Glen? You could always go back to her, you know.’

Instant panic down the phone. ‘No, no. Of course I want us to be together. When can I see you?’

She smiled to herself. All in good time, she thought. First, a little punishment for not ditching the bitch with more enthusiasm. ‘It won’t be for a couple of days, I’m afraid. Busy, busy. You know how it is.’

What might have been an actual sniffle at the other end. ‘I know.’

She softened her tone. ‘Look, I’ll be in touch soon, I promise.’

‘I love you.’

Her other phone was ringing; she could see it was Finley, her personal manager, probably the TV people had already come back to him to confirm the new series. ‘You’re so sweet,’ she said, ‘but I have to go now, darling. Something important has come up.’

Back at the house, she put her security people on alert that an extremely irate wife might try to get through the electronic gates in the next few days. It wouldn’t have been the first time. But Angela never showed up.

The only contact she had with the woman was a message left on her voicemail. Little more than a despairing murmur: ‘You will regret this.’

I’ll get her to write my next novel, double the usual fee, Mandi thought. Money always does the trick. She’ll soon forget her great hurt.

After she finally forgave Glen, they began to be seen on the town together. Pictures of them were splashed all over the tabloids and celebrity mags, along with masses of speculation about the identity of her new boyfriend. And still his wife refused to crawl out of the woodwork. Glen said she hadn’t been in touch for weeks, he had no idea where she was.

Some female feature writers came out with the usual crap, labelling her a bad role model and a symbol of everything that was wrong with celebrity–obsessed modern Britain.

But as Finley happily put it, ‘The only time you have to worry, babe, is when you’re no longer mentioned in the rags.’

She was soon urging Glen to start divorce proceedings, especially after she learned that he and Angela had entered into a prenup agreement that meant he would get to keep most of his money.

PUBLICITY

'I've got to find her first,' Glen said. 'No–one seems to know where she is.'

His wife's absence made no difference. Anticipating their engagement, he gave Mandi a diamond ring that must have cost a month's worth of ops on overweight TV presenters and glamour models requiring an upgrade. Mandi flashed it proudly to the world on her next appearance in public. Not long after, a poll in some teen mag voted her the woman most sixteen year old girls would like to be.

Never once considering the irony that her novel was top of several best seller lists, Mandi decided her life would have been perfect if it hadn't been for Angela. 'Come out, you bitch, wherever you are,' she found herself thinking.

Naturally, everyone now knew that Glen was scheduled to be the next Mr Mandi. And it wasn't long before internet blogs began to ask about the whereabouts of his current wife. Then a piece in a Sunday newspaper added to the gossip, claiming that none of Angela's friends knew where she was, though they unanimously agreed that Glen must have broken her heart.

'She would never have given him a divorce,' one was quoted as saying.

Only days later, Angela's mother reported her as missing to the police. Glen was interviewed but could shed no light on her whereabouts. This only seemed to fuel the rumours, and one or two bloggers even began to refer to foul play.

Mandi panicked a little when she was first asked by a hack if she knew anything about the woman's disappearance.

'They talk like it's all my fault, Finley.'

Her manager was quick to soothe her. 'Don't worry, babe. Everyone loves you. And, as they say in Hollywood, there's no such thing as bad publicity.'

Proof of his wisdom was that the sales of her books and perfumes were going off the graph.

However, it turned out that Angela was much better connected than Mandi could ever have imagined. There were lawyers and even a High Court judge in her family, not to mention at least one well–known politician. This information was eagerly seized on by the media, which must have forced the police to step up their enquires. Glen was called in twice more for questioning.

Then two detectives turned up at the country house; they didn't seem in the least bit awestruck either by the place or Mandi herself. The older and more cynical–looking of the pair took the lead.

'Mr Ogmore claims it's just a coincidence that his wife hasn't been seen since he gave her the elbow. Says she kicked up a fuss, but nothing he couldn't handle. And yet her friends and family all insist she was crazy about him. Doesn't

sound likely, does it, that she'd just let him walk out the door and then do a convenient vanishing act?'

His eyes were fixed on her face, but not in an admiring way. 'Tell me, Miss Alcott, what do you think of his story?'

For the first time in several years, Mandi found herself lost for a smart reply. At last, she managed, 'Of course I believe him.'

As they drove away, she comforted herself with the thought that it was all helping to rocket her profile into the stratosphere. In fact, it would make a great plot for a novel, she decided, feeling more annoyed than ever about Angela's disappearance.

Not long after, with several tabloids hinting that the police enquiries were about to turn into a full–scale murder investigation, Finley showed the first signs of worry.

'Perhaps you ought to think about putting some distance between you and this guy.'

Mandi grew angry. 'What would people think of me?' she said. 'Deserting my man at the first sign of trouble.'

'Yes, all very Joan Crawford, babe, but you're the one who's going to get deserted if you're not careful. The TV people have put off the start date for the new series. The bastards won't say it, of course, but I can tell they're concerned about the potential bad publicity.'

'I thought you said publicity was never bad?'

'We're all allowed one mistake, babe.'

Things soon got worse. After an abandoned wife from Mandi's past made it known she had tried to kill herself out of grief, one of her main sponsors showed signs of reconsidering their contract. Sales of her books were also dropping.

She decided not to wear any makeup on their last date. It would give her a soulful look, and so force Glen to realise the agony he had put her through. She had already taken off his ring, but intended to say it was the least he owed her.

She made every effort to be tactful. 'You do see, don't you, darling, that I have my career to think of? It's probably best all round. Now you can give all your attention to sorting out the mess you're in.'

Glen looked as if a bomb had exploded under his seat. Then he began to swear. Loud and long. 'You fucking bitch! I wish I'd never fucking met you! I could fucking ...!'

Mandi had taken precautions, and security now rushed in and manhandled Glen to his car. As he drove erratically past the tennis court, she contemplated reporting the incident to the police. No, she decided, something like that is bound

to make them even more suspicious of him. It'll drag you in deeper. Best not to attract attention to yourself.

The last idea was so novel that it quite shocked her.

When Glen was taken into custody on suspicion of being involved in the disappearance of his wife, it gave Mandi the opportunity to imply in press interviews and on TV that she was just another innocent victim of a monster. And now, only a few months later, her career was again on track. A recent lad mag poll had voted her the businesswoman most twenty–year–old blokes would like to shag.

Glen was back at work, too, the charges against him having been dropped for lack of evidence. Neither of them had any intention of renewing their affair.

The search for Angela was continuing, but in a much less high–profile way, with only the odd media flurry when she was spotted in some particularly unlikely part of the world, or when DNA had to be used to rule out an unidentified female corpse. Yet even if the woman was no longer headline news, the occasional feature still asked where she was.

Mandi could have told them.

It had started with an almost inaudible whisper in her voicemail. 'I'm coming to get you.'

She hadn't even mentioned it to Finley; her whole image was based on being a strong woman, afraid of nothing and no–one. Anyway, the voice was too faint for her to be certain. Only a prickle at the back of her neck to say it had been Angela.

But since then things had become seriously weird. Noises that no–one else seemed to hear: footsteps on woodblock floors and the rasp of chairs being pulled back in rooms she knew to be empty. The feeling every so often that someone she couldn't see was standing just behind her.

The latest and most frightening development had been the scratching at her bedroom window in both the country house and her London apartment. As if someone was trying to get in. The apartment was six stories up.

She hadn't mentioned any of it to anyone. It's only overwork, she had tried telling herself. But she had gone back to smoking for the first time in over ten years, and she could tell people were worrying about her. Her previous boyfriend had given her some very peculiar looks before she dumped him; and the current one was doing the same, especially when she woke him with her cries of alarm in the night.

'I need a break,' she'd told Finley. 'Somewhere a long way from here.'

She had chosen the furthest place she could think of, which explained why they were lying in bed in this hotel suite in Melbourne, with paparazzi prowling

outside the front door. For the first time ever, she cursed her fame. So much for slipping quietly out of the country, she thought bitterly.

Only hours ago one of the rags back home had repeated internet rumours that she was having a nervous breakdown. No such thing as bad publicity! She would have been tempted to scratch Finley's eyes out if he'd been there.

She thought about Angela for perhaps the twentieth time since waking up. The bitch, where was she? But she already knew the answer.

Aaron, the latest hunk, looked startled. 'What's the matter? You've gone white.'

Mandi was staring at the door to the living room. A new noise, more terifying than any of the others: an urgent–sounding click, click, click. As if invisible fingers with a deadline to meet were hurrying across a keyboard.

'Please look,' she pleaded.

Aaron padded to the door on bare feet and looked into the next room.

'No–one there,' he said, sounding puzzled.

Mandi had the urge to scream. Instead she hugged herself protectively, pushing her breasts out of shape.

No–one there. Except Angela. Her ghostwriter.

GOING OUT TOGETHER

He hadn't flown for years. But that had little to do with the excitement he felt as they powered into the air. Charlotte had seemed right almost from her opening words in the chat room. The electricity between them quickly building. Until ... this. And what was it she'd said about their connection? Yes, that was it. They were soul mates.

However, the plane was still climbing when one of his all–too–familar depressions struck. What if they weren't compatible in the flesh? What if she took one look and thought, there's no way I'm going out with *him*. That would be a record, even by his standards. Most of the pathetically few women who'd shown any interest in him at all had at least had the decency to wait a week or two before doing a runner.

The thought of everything going pear–shaped made him wish Charlotte lived closer to home. Imagine travelling several thousand miles, only to encounter yet another crushing disappointment! But that was the nature of the internet for you. And money, for once, was no object. Thousands sloshing around in his bank account, after the sale of his car and the 40 inch flat screen telly and the stamp collection he'd been accumulating since his school days. That was the reason he'd been able to afford cabin class for the first and only time in his life.

Hitting back at his depression with some vehemence – she *is is is* my soul mate – he squirmed around to make himself comfortable in the seat that miraculously converted into a bed.

The state of being awake won an easy victory over sleep during the long flight, which may have accounted for another of his black dogs as they began the descent into O'Hare.

What if I don't like *her*?

There were such creatures on the planet, after all. Not that his standards were high. Pathetically low, in fact. But he'd heard of more than one case where someone had used fake photos to set up a meeting. He wasn't above a little subterfuge himself. The picture he'd sent Charlotte had been taken over ten years ago, when his paunch hadn't been nearly so pronounced and his hair a lot more abundant. The dog got even blacker. What if she's done something similar – a photo from her past? Will we even recognise each other?

So his heart was thumping for all sorts of reasons when he walked into the crowded arrivals hall.

He recognised her right away. As petite as she'd described herself on several occasions; as wide–eyed and sweetly button–nosed as the face in her pictures.

'Over here, Alex,' she called out.

There was a sunny note in her voice. Bingo, he thought. Someone I would *love* to go out with. It was only British reserve that stopped him from dropping his luggage and rushing to take her in his arms. Instead he held out a slightly trembling hand as they walked toward each other. But Charlotte almost roughly pushed aside his self–conscious gesture, before grabbing him by the shoulders and planting a huge kiss on his reddening cheek. It seemed to verify everything positive he was already thinking about her.

As if determined to conform to another national stereotype, he immediately began to apologise. 'You look exactly like your photo. I know I've changed. Hope I'm not too much of a disappointment.'

Charlotte laughed. 'Don't be silly. I knew it was you even from a distance.'

She gestured around her. 'The Useless State of America!'

It was a phrase she had often used in her messages. Anyone else would have made the words sound bitter and twisted. But from her mouth they sounded welcoming.

An almost unprecedented thought in his head: She's pleased to see me. When she took hold of his hand as they walked thought the terminal, it felt as if his blush was actually beginning to burn up his face. He tried to identify the unaccustomed emotion that was flooding through him. He thought it might be happiness. He tried not to tell himself that it would never last.

They went back to her small apartment in a suburb of Chicago. The place had a hippy sort of feel about it – an Indian–looking throw over the sofa, several bronze pots on a coffee table, a large dreamcatcher drifting in the breeze through the open window.

'Nice,' he said.

Charlotte shrugged. 'It's rented. None of this stuff is mine.'

He was reminded of his own lack of possessions. We're both footloose and fancy–free, he thought. We can go anywhere, do anything we want. He shivered with nervous anticipation, a body movement that was picked up by Charlotte right away. The sensation of her large brown eyes drilling through him, as if she could see into his mind.

'All systems go,' she breathed.

They went out for a meal. Charlotte let him decide on the restaurant. 'The condemned man always gets to choose,' she joked.

They had chicken and ribs and beer in giant glasses. Samuel Adams. Charlotte allowed him to get in the odd word. He didn't mind a bit, since it felt good just to be in her company. He made strenuous efforts to match the playfulness

of her mood. It seemed to hang between them that the important stuff would come later.

But over dessert, as he studied her animated face, he could feel one of his black dogs coming on. Or would it? What if she had already changed her mind? She seemed too relaxed for one thing; not an ounce of strain in her. As if they were simply two friends having a night out. What if it was even worse, a case of her misunderstanding the deadly seriousness of his intentions – in the chat room and then later in their more intimate email exchanges?

He could almost hear her words: 'I thought you were joking.'

Again Charlotte was quick to read the track of his thoughts. Her own mood seemed to darken. He felt wretched for spoiling the meal, but couldn't think of how to put things right. They walked back to her apartment in silence.

As she showed him to the guest room, she put a finger to her lips when he tried to speak.

'Let's talk in the morning. You must be tired. I know I am.'

She gave him a reassuring smile as she left the room; at least he hoped it was reassuring. In spite of having been awake for thirty odd hours, he didn't get much sleep.

Neither of them felt very hungry in the morning. As they pecked at their cereal, Charlotte said, 'How come you never talk about your family?'

He shrugged. 'There's not much much to tell. My parents are both dead. My brother, well, let's just say we've drifted apart.'

'I know what you mean. My parents are also dead.'

Seeing his look, she pulled a face. 'Well, not in a technical sense. But, like I told you, bad things happen in families. I haven't see them in years. Never want to see them again.'

She brightened. 'Anyway, I've had friends to fill the gap.'

Her mobile face instantly tranformed into a frown. 'But no–one who really understood me.'

She smoothed his arm with the flat of her hand. 'Until now.'

His unspoken thoughts were still churning away. Charlotte again caught his eye. Without missing a beat, she said,' All in good time, honey.' She smiled. 'You in some sort of rush?'

'I – I suppose not.'

When she laughed, it sounded less self–assured than he remembered, less authentic, shivery in the cold light of day. He felt a spurt of hope.

GOING OUT TOGETHER

They went for a walk after breakfast. The neighbourhood was leafy and quiet, but his companion clearly had no great affection for her surroundings. She pointed at a presumably harmless if dopey–looking old couple going about their business.

'Look at them. Like everyone else in this country. Literally dead to the world.'

Knowing what was coming, he made a non–committal noise.

'The Useless State of America!'

This time it came out jagged, as if something sharp was tearing at her throat. There was real pain on her face, and he had to work to keep relief off his own features. It confirmed what he'd already begun to think – that all the laughter and bright chatter was an act, her way of holding herself together. That she needed him as much as he needed her. That they were indeed soul mates.

Charlotte's smile was so fragile that it made him wonder how he'd ever been taken in.

'I know what you're thinking, Alex. The same old thing. But I can't help the way I feel. It just hurts so much, thinking about what's going on. People dying all over for no good reason. Starving. Bombed to death. Useless America! Useless world!'

She had seemed a bit of a drama queen on his computer screen. It was the sort of stuff he imagined some people came out with when they were generally pissed off. She's just depressed, like me, he had always thought. Politics had never been his thing. Too busy worrying about himself. But Charlotte's problem really did appear to involve the whole planet. He felt a moment of shame for his selfishness, and it also came to him that she was quite right.

'Yes, it's a shit world,' he said.

Now Charlotte looked genuinely pleased. She touched his arm. 'I always thought I was on my own.'

He took a second or two to accept the cue.

'Well, there's two of us now!'

Before Charlotte could say anything, he had one of his moments of panic. 'That is right, isn't it?'

'Of course it is.'

'And we're going out together?'

'We're definitely going out together!'

Suddenly they were both starving. They held hands all the way to the restaurant.

GOING OUT TOGETHER

In the evening, they spoke of the separate paths that had brought them together. He told her about his troubles, the black dogs, his ever–present sense of isolation. At times, as she narrated her own story, it appeared as if all the life was draining out of Charlotte. Sighs instead of giggles now. She wept more than once. He hadn't cried since childhood, but could feel tears stinging his eyes as he watched her. At the same time, her sadness made him feel stronger. This is for real, he thought. No more bullshit.

As usual, Charlotte put into words what he was feeling. 'I know I'm damaged goods, Alex, and I'm sure you think the same about yourself. But together we're going to beat it.'

She had everything mapped out. He was glad of that, since forward planning had never been one of his strong points. They talked themselves into silence, and stayed on her sofa all night, arms wrapped around each other.

Neither of them woke up in a mood; in fact, Charlotte couldn't keep the smile off her face.

'What a lovely day!' she said, drawing the drapes aside to let in a burst of sunlight.

The mischievous tone was back in her voice. 'Shall we just skip breakfast and go for that little drive I promised you?'

As she steered her Volkswagen through the traffic, she told him again about where they were going.

'It's a lovely place, kind of like a forest but close to the city. Best thing is it's never busy during the week. We'll have the place to ourselves.'

He could feel one of his depressions coming on – she's just messing around, I'll wake up in a minute and find it's all been a dream – but managed to squeeze out a smile, determined not to spoil things for her.

'Sounds ideal.'

She looked across at him and smiled.

'Just relax,' she said. 'You're in good hands.'

Still craving reassurance, he said, 'So this is what it's like, going out together?'

'Didn't I tell you?' She threw back her head and laughed. 'Isn't it just the greatest feeling?'

She looked at him again.

'Soul mates?'

'Soul mates.'

'High five!'

GOING OUT TOGETHER

His doubts draining away, the black dog lifting even more suddenly than it had descended, he slapped his palm against hers. No more inhibitions, he told himself. The urban sprawl was already thinning out. Charlotte tuned the car radio to a rock station, and for the first time in his life he sang along without worrying about what other people might think. Charlotte joined in when an old Cream number came on.

'*Iiiiii feel freeeeee!*'

Their bodies were found by some hikers the next day. The Volkswagen was filled with the fumes from a mixture of chemicals obtained from someone who specialises in providing the perfect way out. They were holding hands.

OLD MAN

It was my first job on my own and I had an attack of butterflies in the taxi. I practically had to shout at myself. For goodness sake, there's only one of him and you're used to dealing with *hundreds*.

From the outside, the house looked as if it had seen far better days, but was absolutely huge. Much too big for just one old man. And soon me. But it certainly confirmed what the agency had said about Benjamin Crowley having pots of money.

I wondered for a moment if the plump middle–aged woman who let me in was some sort of housekeeper. Why do they need *me* then, I thought. But the duster in one hand seemed to indicate she wasn't anything so grand.

'I'm Janice,' she said with a fat lady's smile. 'I come in three days a week. Tidying up, that sort of thing.'

She led me along a hallway that was only a bit smaller than the flat I'd recently been renting, but otherwise wasn't much to write home about: ugly old–fashioned furniture and a floral carpet that looked as if it had been slowly rotting since the year dot.

I shouldn't be cruel, but a similar thing could be said about its owner. However, I suppose you're entitled to look any way you want at eighty–two. Anyway, I've seen a lot worse.

He motioned me forward as I entered the room. His creaky voice was surprisingly assertive.

'Come closer,' he said. 'My eyes aren't as sharp as they used to be.'

It sounded as if he was good at giving orders.

'My name is Rachel,' I said as I approached him. 'I'm going to be your carer.'

He grew tetchy. 'I know that, girl. I might be old, but I'm not stupid.'

That told me.

He stared at me for several long seconds, almost like a fisherman wondering if he ought to throw me back. But even if I say so myself, I'm not too bad–looking, and something told me that old Benjamin was a man who had had his share of pretty girls.

There might even have been a twinkle in his eyes when he finally said, 'You'll do,'

He gestured with his head to the cleaning lady. 'Show her to her room, Janice.'

'Yes, sir,' she said in a pretend soldier way.

We were both giggling as we went up the stairs. ‘Poor old sod,’ Janice said. ‘No–one but me to boss around these days.’ Then she grinned at me. ‘Oh, and you now.’

The bedroom was like the rest of the house, quite a bit worn at the edges and out–of–date, but it was large and airy and more than adequate.

Janice was looking curious. ‘Not going to be much of a life for you,’ she said. ‘Rattling around in this enormous place. With him.’

I was all professionalism. ‘It’s my job.’ Neglecting to tell her it was my first time.

My turn to be curious. ‘How has he managed before? I mean if you only come in three days a week.’

‘Don’t let his appearance fool you. When he wants, he can get around. He used to have part–time people coming in before this, you know, to cook and stuff. But his daughter put her foot down. Said he had to have someone permanent. It’s not as if he can’t afford it.’

I knew a little about the daughter. ‘She lives up North, doesn’t she? Runs some sort of charity.’

‘Yes. Nice lady. Always trying to persuade him to go and live with her. But he’s a stubborn old bugger. Likes his independence, he says.’

She ran a quick eye over the room and seemed satisfied. I guessed she had made a special effort with her feather duster, just for me. I decided I liked her a lot.

After some more chat, mainly about the old man’s likes and dislikes – almost all of which I knew already, the agency had been very thorough – Janice said she had to go. ‘I’ve got my own big baby at home waiting to be fed.’

‘Husband?’

‘Dog.’

We had another good laugh.

‘I’m sure you’ll be fine with him,’ she reassured me as she put on her coat.

I wasn’t so sure of that, but made cheery noises, still trying to convince myself more than anything. ‘This is going to be *sooo* easy after some of the places I’ve worked, you know, nursing homes. Dozens of mouths to feed and backsides to wipe.’

Janice shuddered. ‘Rather you than me. By the way, you know the daughter, Barbara, is coming down to vet you next week?’

Of course I knew.

Which was why in the days that followed I attempted to learn as much as I could about the woman. In order to do my job more thoroughly, you understand

(though there may have been some natural feminine interest thrown in).

Not that I had much luck, as it turned out. Even when I asked the most innocent questions, my new employer would lower his voice, making it a strain to hear him, and then tell me almost nothing that I didn't know already. I wondered if it was some sort of cruel game he was playing. Make her sweat, nosy cow. Keep her in the dark.

I knew he'd once owned a big company – it explained the house – and wondered if it was a tactic he'd used in his business dealings.

Anyway, he nearly always ended up shouting, 'Change the record!'

The good thing was that he only raised his voice when he was annoyed.

The bad thing – that was a lot of the time.

He complained about almost everything: from the runniness of my boiled eggs to the amount of hot water in his baths. He practically had a seizure when the chairlift that took him from one floor to the next began to squeak. Said I should have oiled the tracks. I consoled myself with the thought that he was probably used to ordering around *hundreds* of people. Now there was just poor little me. I actually felt sympathy for him.

It helped his case that he never once sounded sorry for himself. I could see the pitiable attempts he was making to preserve the last of his independence. He hated me helping him to his feet and always insisted on making the long, hard trudge to the toilet or chairlift with nothing but his walking stick.

He could also be funny, and even quite charming, when he wanted. In a sarcastic sort of way, it's true, almost as if he was secretly laughing at me. For example, the time he teased me for putting out a gravy boat when we were having a roast dinner (beautifully cooked, I might add).

'I know I'm old, girl, but I'm not quite a leftover from the Victorians.'

Another good thing was that he didn't spare himself. After someone phoned to find out how he was, I asked if he was still in touch with many of his friends. 'I'd need to visit a lot of graveyards to do that,' he joked.

I don't want to sound boastful, but I think it wasn't just my looks that he found quite pleasing by the time his daughter showed up. To be honest, *I* was quite pleased with me. No longer wishing myself back in a nursing home, looking for safety in numbers. I had even found the courage to give as good as I got, something he seemed to enjoy.

'Stop shouting. I'll do it in a minute.'

A whine of self–pity. 'I'm paying for the pathetic service you're providing, girl.'

'You haven't begun to see pathetic yet, mister.'

‘Bullying cow.’

But he was smirking as he said it.

So the only thing that *really* continued to annoy me was the business of his daughter. The same old answers, in the same irritating mumble, until he finally lost his temper.

‘There’s nothing to tell, girl, she runs a dog charity.’

‘She lives in a nice house in a nice part of Manchester. That’s about it.’

‘Change the record!’

Most old people I’ve known – and that’s a lot! – just *love* talking about their families (when they can remember them). So, naturally, I grew even more curious about the daughter. There was nothing in his voice to say he didn’t like her. No, it was something else. I’m not a deep thinker as a rule, but I have the odd flash of what could pass for insight. It crossed my mind that he didn’t want to *share* her with me.

I wasn’t sure if it was him or me being weird.

Luckily, Janice had scraped together some information over the years she’d been cleaning his house. ‘She’s his only child. From his first wife.’

‘First?’

‘He had a couple of others after her. Never talks about them, though.’

I felt more left out than ever. ‘I don’t even know about the *first* one.’

‘Oh, he’ll talk a little about her eventually. When he gets to know you better. She had an accident apparently, died quite young. But he won’t go into the details.’

Barbara was therefore still a bit of a mystery woman when she turned up at the door. She had never married, so Janice believed, and her appearance seemed to confirm it. No ring on her finger, and a look about her that said: I can take care of myself. She was also extremely well–preserved for someone who had to be in her fifties, hardly a wrinkle in sight (great plastic surgeon, I thought). Extremely affluent as well, to judge from her outfit and the posh car in the drive outside.

There was nothing snobbish about her attitude, though. After giving me a warm hug, she scolded her father.

‘I hope you’re not bullying Rachel.’

But she was smiling as she said it and I could tell she thought the world of him.

I felt sure the old man would hit back with a list of my shortcomings, even if only to have a bit of geriatric sport at my expense. Instead he looked serious, almost solemn, and said, ‘We’re getting on like a house on fire. Aren’t we, girl?’

Surprise turned my voice into a squeak. ‘Oh, absolutely.’

However, it was only when he joined in our laughter that I *really* began to wonder if Barbara was a fairy queen who had cast a spell over him. He even looked different somehow. All sorts of feelings can change a person's appearance, of course – people have told me I'm beautiful when I smile – and I felt sure I could read pleasure and pride on his battered old features. But there also seemed to be a less obvious emotion. Then it came to me. He looked a bit in awe of her.

As I said, I have these fancy ideas sometimes.

We had our evening meal around the table in the massive dining room. Barbara talked about her charity, but spent much more time telling me how successful her father had been at running his own company. How tough and clever he had seemed to her when she was a child. How ashamed she still felt about not following in his footsteps, which meant he had to sell the business when he decided to retire.

I half expected Benjamin to get rather crotchety about that. After all, you could say she had let him down. But nothing of the sort. He smiled the benevolent new smile I was only just getting used to and said, 'Never mind, all water under the bridge.'

The stunning thing was he looked as if he meant it. I wondered again about Barbara's magic powers.

It also felt strange that he hadn't once shouted at me since her arrival, had barely raised his voice for any reason, in fact. In every way, he was acting more subdued than usual. No longer hogging the conversation or laying down the law. Listening in a respectful silence to everything his daughter said.

To tell the truth, I wanted the real Benjamin back. I was already missing the old grouch.

Barbara didn't seem at all surprised by the change in her father. For all her references to his ruthless streak in the old days, his bad temper now, she obviously expected him to be on his best behaviour when she was around. She made this clear when he tried to cut in while I was speaking.

'Dad, please.'

I felt a pang when Benjamin just nodded his head and fell silent.

Even when she was giving me all her attention, he hardly took his eyes off her. Watching her like a hawk – a daddy hawk who was a bit worried about his chick (must have been my day for fancy ideas).

It didn't seem right somehow, feeling sorry him, so I was really pleased when, just for a moment, he went back to being the uncompromising businessman his daughter remembered.

'Have you reconsidered, dad?' Giving me an embarrassed look. 'Sorry, Rachel, but I'm trying to put you out of a job.'

Benjamin cottoned on right away. 'You can ask me a million times, but I'm staying put. It's my home. I expect to be carried out of here feet first.

'Morbid old devil,' Barbara muttered.

But I was cheering him in my head (and not for the reason you're thinking).

Barbara liked me. People do. Obviously disappointed, but knowing from experience it was useless to argue, she asked me to take good care of her father. I said I would. Not long after, she returned to Manchester. As we waved her off from the front porch, the old man had a funny sort of smile on his face, the way you would look if you were quite glad to see the back of someone. Strange, I thought.

But at least he was his normal grumpy self again. Almost before her car vanished from sight, he was complaining that I never put enough fabric softener in the washing machine, his shirt collar was chafing his neck. Silly masochistic me, but it felt good to have him back.

And I knew he was getting just as comfortable with me when he began to talk about his first wife one afternoon as I settled him into his favourite chair. He told me they had married in the early 1950s, when he was still working in an office. Barbara was their only child.

'We were married for fifteen years. Before ...'

When his rasping voice trailed off, I remembered what Janice had told me.

As he he stared at me, there was an oddness in his eyes that brought on another of my loopy ideas. Did I remind him of his wife? After a long pause, he started off again. He looked sad and sorry for himself, but to tell the truth it wasn't all that different from when he was having heartburn.

'Yes, she died, you know.'

Though we are trained not to gossip, I sometimes have problems in that area. However, I was careful not to show any eagerness.

'Oh, did she?'

Instant irritation. 'Stop humouring me, girl!'

'Sorry.'

Returning to the past then. 'Yes, I remember it like it was yesterday.'

If I had a pound for every time I've been told *that*!

But there was definitely pain and not indigestion on his face now. 'It was an accident. She drowned.'

'How horrible!'

He made a weak gesture, as if he was trying to brush away the bad memory. ‘It was a long time ago.’

Back to the present, back to the attack. ‘Will you stop looking at me with your mouth open and plump up my cushion!’

I couldn’t help thinking about it as I got ready for bed that night. How romantic, I thought. To still be so sad about something that happened so long ago.

I didn’t mention the drowning to Janice. As I said, we’re trained not to gossip. Also, it felt good keeping to myself a piece of info that she hadn’t got out of him in ten years of trying. I can be a vain and silly bitch at times.

Now he’d broken the ice, Benjamin obviously wanted to tell me a whole lot more about Vera. He nattered away about their early life together in particular – the day they met, their first date, the luxury hotel he took her to after his business started to make money. That sort of thing. As for his other wives, apart from a single reference to having been married three times, they might never have existed.

Much more peculiar was that his daughter rarely got a mention either. He would talk about her on other occasions – though even that, as I’ve said, was like pulling a tooth – but hardly ever included her in his ramblings about his wife. Yet another of my thoughts: almost as if he wanted to keep them *apart.*

Then one day, without warning, he began to talk about the accident.

The usual introduction: ‘I remember it like it was yesterday.’

I waited, thinking of Janice, trying not to feel smug.

‘We were on holiday in West Wales, around Pembroke,’ he went on. ‘Magnificent walks there, along the cliffs. It was autumn, I remember, and not very nice. Raining, you know. But Vera liked walking in the rain. We were talking one second and then she was gone. Gone.’ Looking at me in an almost pleading way. ‘Must have slipped on a rock or something. It was a long way down into the sea. And she wasn’t a great swimmer.’

I couldn’t help myself. ‘And where was Barbara when it happened?’

His voice dropped in the way I’d come to expect when his daughter’s name entered the conversation. Even lower than usual, in fact, almost a whisper. ‘Oh, she was there.’

‘How awful for her!’

‘Yes ... yes. Where is that cocoa I asked for an hour ago?’

I had mixed feelings as I prepared his drink. Of course, I felt sorry for Benjamin. But the almost offhand way he’d dismissed the fact that Barbara had witnessed her mother’s death!

Wanting to be sure, I compared notes with Janice the next day about Barbara’s age at the time of the accident.

She was immediately suspicious. ‘Have you found out what happened?’

I *sooo* much wanted to blab to her! But some instinct warned me off. And it was only partly do with the carer’s code. Perhaps when I know some more, I told myself. Anyway, we decided Barbara must have been thirteen or fourteen years old.

I kept my voice casual. ‘Have you noticed how he doesn’t like talking about her. Sort of mumbles when you ask even the simplest question?’

Janice pondered. ‘I suppose, you’re right. Never thought about it really. Suppose I always thought he felt like he was letting her down. You know, feeling guilty about not going to live with her.’

The word ‘guilty’ struck a chord with me, but for a completely different reason – and all at once I wanted to know *everything* about the accident. So I did what any good woman would do, I turned into a sneaky cow. But I can be a patient sneaky cow when I put my mind to it. I waited for the old man to get back to the subject of his own accord. Somehow I knew he would.

And that’s what he did, though in a totally unexpected way.

I was making sure he was settled for the night when he suddenly sat up in bed. ‘I loved my wife, you know that?’ Looking almost as if he wanted to challenge me to a fight.

Startled, I said, ‘Of course you did, Benjamin.’

His yell was as loud as he could manage (which was pretty loud for an eighty–two year old). ‘DON’T HUMOUR ME, GIRL!’

After taking some time to calm him down, I sat holding his trembling hand until he started to snore. I was about to leave the room when his voice drifted from what seemed like a long way away.

‘I thought she loved *me*.’

The words sent me to my own bed in a slightly troubled state of mind. I know from bitter experience that the balance isn’t always even in relationships. There are the I’ll–die–for–you sort of people and the ones who can take it or leave it. Sometimes they can be married to each other.

Was that the case with you? I wanted to ask him.

But, with some difficulty, I continued to be patient.

And luckily I didn’t have long to wait.

I was cutting his food up for him when he said, ‘I wonder what Vera would think if she could see me like this. Pathetic old fool!’ His bitterness was sharper than any knife.

‘She wouldn’t think any the less of you, I’m sure,’ I soothed.

OLD MAN

As his eyes wandered over my face, it again occurred to me that perhaps I resembled his dead wife. No way of telling, of course, unless he showed me a photo of her. Then, for the first time, it occurred to me that he didn't have any on display, not even in his bedroom.

Curious, I thought.

He was still studying me in a twitchy sort of way. But at least his voice had grown a lot calmer. A lot slyer, too.

'You want to know something, girl?'

'What's that, Benjamin?'

'She didn't think that much of me even in the old days. Not towards the end, anyhow.'

It would have sounded poignant but for the unpleasant note of cunning. I was intrigued, I admit. A less professional person might have cracked. As it was, I practically had to bite on my tongue.

Be patient.

I could tell he wanted to tell me more, I could see it in his eyes. Then he pushed the plate away. 'I don't like this muck!'

We watched a soap that evening. It was the usual rubbish, a storyline about adultery, and I thought Benjamin had dozed off. So I jumped when his voice floated out of the semi–darkness.

'That happened to me, you know.'

'What do you mean?'

'What do you think I mean! Playing away from home, girl!'

Vera or you? I wondered, and held my breath in case he came to another dead stop.

It might have been the fact he could barely see me (he liked watching TV with the light switched off). Anyway, to my relief, he carried on. To tell the truth, it sounded as if he was speaking to himself more than me.

The first thing he said answered my question.

'Yes, she got bored with me, I suppose. Working every hour of the day, you know.' Sourness suddenly lending him strength. 'Not enough for her to be rich, have everything she wanted!'

The words came out automatically. 'I'm so sorry.'

I expected him to explode and then clam up. Someone like me, a slip of a girl, feeling sorry for him! But to my relief, his voice went back to being quite composed, matter–of–fact even. It was as if I hadn't said anything at all.

‘One of my oldest friends, he was. When I found out, she asked me to forgive her. I was a hard bastard in those days. Do unto others before they do unto you was my motto. Cut someone’s liver out if he crossed me.’ A pause. ‘But not with her. I took her back.’

A silence that seemed to stretch and stretch. Thinking I had no choice but to prompt him, I chose my words with care. ‘What happened to the man?’

‘Oh, he ran away, like the coward he was. Went abroad, we never saw him again.’

Then I tried flattery to keep him talking. ‘Lucky for him.’

‘Yes, lucky bastard.’ Benjamin gave a croak that must have been a laugh, while making a feeble slash with his stick. ‘Cut his liver out!’

I suddenly felt glad I had never upset him in his more robust younger days.

‘It was after that we decided to go to West Wales for a break. Get ourselves back on the rails, you know. Did I tell you Vera liked walking in the rain?’

‘And Barbara went with you?’

I almost asked the question – how old was she? Wanting to confirm it was the same trip to Wales. The accident.

‘Yes, we decided things had to get back to normal as soon as possible. For her sake.’

Keeping my voice small, worried about going too far. ‘And did she know ... um, about her mother?’

‘No, we didn’t tell her. What would have been the point? Telling her *that* about her mother.’ A note of doleful pride then, as if he was reminding himself of the man he’d once been. ‘Though she liked me even better, you know. Real daddy’s girl, she was.’

Another extended silence. I was holding my breath when the disembodied voice started up again. ‘It was the day before we were due to drive there, I remember. Like it was yesterday. The bastard got in touch with me.’

I was puzzled. ‘I thought you said ...’

As usual, he was super–quick on the uptake for his age. ‘I said I never *saw* him!’

In spite of having trouble making out his expression, I could tell he was having doubts about going on. ‘Stupid girl’ must have been written right across his worn–out features. I gave silent thanks when he calmed down.

‘He sent me a letter from wherever he was. Claimed he’d been having sex with Vera before we even got married. Wanted to get back at me, I suppose. And her, for choosing me and not him. Then he told me something else ...’

OLD MAN

Well, I've heard some pretty mind–boggling things from the old people I've cared for. But this was top of the list by a long way. His words really, *really* shocked me.

'He told me Barbara was his daughter.'

'Oh, my God!'

'My words exactly.'

'But you went ahead with your trip?'

For once, I had him on the defensive, 'Well, I thought it would be best to have it out somewhere neutral.'

I got up and switched on the light, wanting to be able to see him properly. 'And did you have it out?'

'Yes.'

A spell of brooding, lowering his head until it almost seemed as if he'd fallen asleep. But his knuckles were showing white on the handle of his stick.

'Are you alright?'

He suddenly raised his turtle head, making me jump. 'Of course we had it out! Silly bitch!'

I couldn't decide if he was referring to me or his dead wife.

He was still shouting, trying to raise his stick. 'Hammer and tongs! Silly bitch!'

Again I was pleased about his lack of physical strength.

'She denied it, of course. I didn't believe her.'

He'd quietened down but the hardness remained on his face, making him look younger and tougher. My next thought frightened me. Forty years ago, he would have been strong enough to attack *anyone*.

Walking along the cliffs, he'd said. Convenient place for an 'accident'.

I wondered if I actually wanted to know any more, but somehow couldn't stop myself. 'And Barbara still had no idea what was going on?'

He stared at me without a blink. 'We kept our quarrel to our room.' A shrug that was dreadful in its lack of concern. 'But we were very loud. Thin walls in these hotels.'

His eyes were still fixed on my face, mocking me, daring me to go on. I took a deep breath.

'So you went for a walk? After the quarrel?'

'Yes, we did.'

He had an expression that I couldn't fathom at first. But then it came to me.

He looked relieved.

Only natural, I told myself: forty years is an *age* to keep such a secret.

But then another appalling thought. He'd said that Barbara had been there when his wife fell! Did that mean she had seen her mother being pushed from the cliff? Surely that would have traumatised her for life? And yet she seemed so normal, didn't seem in the least bit afraid of her father. If anything it was Benjamin who looked uncomfortable when they were together.

Had he forced her to remain silent? Was it guilt that made him so reluctant even to talk about his daughter?

So many questions!

There was a taunt in the old man's voice, a knowing smirk on his pinched lips. He didn't look or sound in the least bit guilty.

'Have you guessed the truth yet?'

Now I was confused.

'Think, girl!'

He saw I was still floundering. 'Shall I put you out of your misery? How about a clue first? I told you she loved me better than her mother. Loved me to death, in fact.'

We stared at each other for what felt like a very long time.

'Yes, my darling murdering daughter.'

The old man's cackle was horrible to hear, but I could tell he was speaking the truth. Suddenly, with my legs turning to jelly, I could have done with his stick. I had to flop into the nearest armchair.

It was as if a dam had burst. 'I could see it on your face. Before she came, after she came. He doesn't like talking about her, doesn't want to live with her. What's going on? So now you know. The memory of that day is more real and terrible than ever, that's the trouble. She had a temper as a child, you know. You would never guess it to look at her now. Butter wouldn't melt. Anyway, one thing led to another on that clifftop and she pushed her mother.'

A pause, then an arthritic shudder. 'To be honest, she still scares me a little.'

That made two of us.

The words were rushing out again. 'Do you know, I still don't know if it was the bastard or my wife who was lying. And of course there was no such thing as DNA in those days. Even if there had been, I wouldn't have had it done. Come what may, she was my daughter. She had loved me more than her mother, enough to throw her into the sea. Wasn't that sufficient?'

There was one more horrible surprise to come. He gestured me to move closer. 'I have a joke I've never been able to tell anyone.'

I just stared.

The awful face he pulled made me wonder if he had heartburn, before I realised he was attempting a wink. His voice dropped in the way it normally did when he was talking about Barbara. 'I *had* to forgive her. Want to know why?'

Since I had leaned forward to catch his words, the shocking bit caught me with full force. His spittle on my cheek. His voice rising practically to a scream.

'BECAUSE BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER!'

I knew he was letting out something that had been inside him for a very long time. He was banging the ground with his stick and tears were streaming from his eyes. He could have been laughing himself sick or having a good old weep. It might have been a bit of both.

SWEET DREAMS

It makes me wonder how people managed in the old days. Not being able to control their memories, I mean. Gloomy, even scary, recollections popping into their heads without warning.

Like most people, I guess, I would always choose to look on the bright side. It's human nature. We all do it. Lousy day at work? Easy. Delete. A quarrel with a friend? Delete. Suffering from a broken heart? Delete and replace with you dumping her.

Thank God for progress.

I have more reason than ever for despising the moralists who moan that people no longer have to live with the bad things they've done. Leaving them free to go on doing bad things, etc, etc. It annoys me that there is never a peep from them about the falling suicide figures. And who would want to go back to the early part of the twenty–first century, when half the population must have been in therapy?

Fact is the world is a happier place.

Or so I thought.

It started off as a usual morning, firing up my computer for the day ahead, still thinking back to the night before. What a honey! Just how I like them, blonde and big–breasted, not to mention wild and willing. Virtual women are beautiful in every way: no need to wine or dine them, or sit through some crappy movie in order to hit the jackpot.

Some killjoys see that as another kind of problem. You know, the drop in population levels, yawn, yawn. Conveniently forgetting that we don't need so many people – and certainly not the ones who empty garbage cans and drive buses and wait at tables. Nowadays robots can be made to do just about any job that doesn't involve a brain.

Never thought it would happen to me, of course. I was a designer of neural implants, working to make our dreams ever more real. Helping to make the world an even happier place. One of the good guys.

Which is why it was such a shock when the cops came to my door that morning.

One of them, a mean–looking guy the size of an outhouse, imprinted an image on my retina. 'That your mother?' he growled.

'Yes, but she's dead,' I responded after a second's pause, my usually razor sharp reflexes slowed by the unexpectedness of what was happening.

The detective scowled at me. 'We know that.'

His partner slimed out of the background and into my consciousness. 'We're really sorry to bother you, Mr Caledos. But how did you two get along?'

SWEET DREAMS

I summoned up my earliest memory of mom: smiling as she kissed the arm I'd bruised from a fall at age three or four. 'Just fine,' I said.

The big cop looked as if he wanted to hit me. 'That's not what we heard,' he rasped.

The other guy stepped between us, insincerity oozing out of every pore. 'Please excuse Frank's lousy temper, Mr Caledos. His wife's just had a baby. You know, the sleepless nights.'

I almost laughed out loud, their good and bad routine was so pathetic. People really shouldn't play games with someone who has twice their brainpower. Probably half the fantasies in the thick noggins of these two had been put there by my creative skills.

I was also growing very angry. I had a presentation to make at the Department of Obesity in less than an hour; and the contract for implants to diminish the activity of hunger–inducing neurons in the brain would be worth billions to the successful corporate bidder.

'Look, what's this about?'

Then the slimy cop threw me. 'When did you last see your brother, Mr Caledos?'

I remember thinking that maybe I spent too much time in an ivory tower. That I should have more respect for less sophisticated minds, the way they can twist and turn and, just occasionally, produce surprises. I needed to remind myself more often that not everyone outside my circle of friends and acquaintances was a moron.

This guy, for instance, was quick to pick up on my momentary silence. As his eyes cut into me, it didn't help my composure that I was digging just to recall my brother's name. Not so surprising since I'd long since expunged most of my memories of him.

But I've always been outstanding at recovering my eqilibrium under pressure. 'A long, long time ago,' I said, in a firm voice. 'We never got on.'

The big cop was still wielding his sledgehammer. 'Not like with your mother, you mean?' he sneered.

I ignored him and concentrated on the slimeball. Anger had taken a back seat by now and genuine curiosity was behind the wheel. 'What is this about?'

When his partner started to bluster, the brains of the outfit gestured him into silence. Since I like to see natural authority in action, my respect for him grew. Also in his favour was that he seemed to have given up on the mind games.

'We have Marlon in custody for attempted robbery.'

SWEET DREAMS

It was turning into one hell of a day. Not yet nine in the morning and I'd already been thrown a curve ball on at least three separate occasions. But, as I said, I'm legendary for keeping my cool.

'What's that got to do with me?'

'He wants to do a spot of plea bargaining. Named you as an accomplice in another of his crimes.'

My poise was being tested to the limit. For once, I wished I was back in the bad old days; at least I might be better prepared for whatever they were about to chuck at me. Still, the almost complete lack of memories connected to my brother enabled me to speak the absolute truth.

'I have no idea what he's talking about.'

The slimeball had most definitely given up messing with me. 'He says that the two of you killed your mother.'

We watched each other for a bit. Then I laughed. The cop seemed to be enjoying his own private joke. He smiled at his partner, before switching his gaze back to me. 'But I don't suppose you remember that.'

The big detective guffawed. 'Wiped clean out of his head.'

The slimeball smirked along with him. 'Can't blame the guy, Frank. No–one wants that sort of memory.'

We resumed eyeballing each other. There was something cold and unforgiving in his eyes, the joke a very private one. Since I hardly ever lose a staring match, it felt like a bad defeat when I was the first to break off.

Now he was talking fast. 'Unless he's a psychopath like your brother, Mr Caledos, who's got some pretty nasty things on his charge sheet and seems to get his kicks from remembering them.'

It's never been my style to rant and rave, but I was very tempted at that moment. Back to being seriously pissed off, I had to work hard to hold my voice steady.

'So what it amounts to is this. You're holding someone who claims to be my brother ...'

The bruiser intervened. 'Oh, he's definitely your brother. We checked with the national DNA database.'

I almost congratulated him on being able to put two whole sentences together.

'And now he's made some spurious allegation against me to try and wriggle out of a jail sentence. And you have obviously been taken in by his lies.' I finally allowed myself some righteous indignation. 'The whole thing beggars belief, it really does.'

SWEET DREAMS

I locked eyes with the slimeball again, determined this time not to be the first to look away. When he pretended to study his notebook, my confidence went back to the max, prompting me to speak as if he was one of my slower subordinates. ‘You know you’re wasting your time, don’t you?’ A pause for effect. ‘More importantly, you are also wasting my time.’

The smile had gone from his face. With the pair of them scowling at me like baboons, I pressed home my advantage. Business, sporting contests, romantic entanglements: I have never hesitated to trample over someone who has just landed in a heap. ‘The fact is you don’t have a shred of evidence, do you?’

Silence. Knowing that his bluff had been called, the slimeball was obviously struggling to get the oomph back into his offense. The big cop was just struggling.

I might be a ruthless bastard, but I can also be magnanimous in victory. ‘OK, fellows, I’ll admit to one thing. I got rid of my thoughts around the time she died because they were just too painful. But is that a crime?’

I dredged up one of my few memories of my brother, kept as a salutary reminder of the enormous difference between us. ‘I loved my mom, but I’m pretty sure you couldn’t say the same about Marlon. He even punched her in the face once when she wouldn’t give him the cash for drugs.’

Any longer and I’d have had the bruiser blubbing. As they were leaving, the slimeball paused at the door. ‘We take any allegation of murder seriously. Mr Caledos.’

He was trying the cold stare again, but it no longer worked. As I said, I was one of the good guys. I looked good and sounded even better. Marlon had been a full–time junkie at sixteen; probably looked like the worst kind of shit now he was in his forties. His word against mine had to be no contest. Must be a slow day down at the station, I decided, or maybe they just wanted to clap their eyes on a penthouse.

I also decided to stash away their visit for future reference. After Marlon had been sent down for a nice long stretch, I might even bring it out of the closet at one of my dinner parties, I thought, use it to bolster my already raffish image. I was thinking up a guest list as I went to bed in a good mood after a successful, if delayed, presentation at the Department of Obesity. The cops hadn’t been back in touch.

I guess that one of these days there’ll be a discarded memory database and scanners to read every thought a person has ever had. But that’s a long way in the future. For now, we are living in a golden age. Bad memories can be erased for good.

But the current technology is deficient in another, less happy respect.

Our nightmares can't be controlled.

Perhaps I'd been more affected by the events of the day than I realized. Maybe it was the unwelcome return of my brother into my life that was triggering a negative response in my subconscious. Dreams are just physiological responses to neural processes during sleep, everyone knows that.

Anyway, I dreamed we were killing our mother together in various ways. We boiled her in oil, then we took it in turns to stab her, before pushing her off a cliff. But she wouldn't die. She was still smiling at me when I cut her head off.

All my thoughts of mom involved her smiling.

But memories are so unreliable. Especially these days, when they can be made up. The one thing I knew for certain about mom, for instance, was that Marlon hated her.

After the cops came calling, I was tempted to erase the last remaining recollections of my brother. That sort of past I could do without. I was still thinking about it when the slimeball detective rang to say they couldn't make the burglary charge stick. But the good news was that the Chief of Police, a friend of a friend of mine, had decided against investigating his mom murder story.

'Looks as if you're off the hook, Mr Caledos,' the slimeball said. His tone made it plain that he thought I was as guilty as sin. It crossed my mind that, as a form of rough justice, he might have given Marlon my address.

With that in mind, I suddenly felt glad that I'd kept some memories of my brother. At least I would know him when I saw him. I told myself the piggy teenage face, old before its time, couldn't have changed that much.

After mom's death, I had gotten as far away from him as possible. We hadn't seen each other for more than twenty years. How had he ended up in the same city as me? I'm a pretty high profile guy in my own way, so I guessed he could have seen me in the media somewhere. Did that mean he was deliberately out to make trouble for me?

Murdering my ever–smiling mom, it seemed crazy. But I was still getting the bad dreams and my work had started to suffer. Since I have never in my whole life waited passively for a narrative to unfold, I decided to confront my brother.

If you have the money and the clout, no–one can hide away from you for long. The private eye with an inside track to the police department located him inside twenty–four hours. He was living in a shelter for the homeless just outside a nearby town. I drove there right away.

It was Marlon alright, though the porcine features were badly emaciated. He

looked forty going on sixty, no doubt due to alcohol or substance abuse, probably both.

He didn't seem surprised to see me.

'Hiya, sport, good to see you again.'

He was amazingly cheerful for a destitute who had just escaped a prison sentence. I wondered if he thought his ship was about to come in. Let's face it, I looked rich, hell, I even *smelled* rich.

But in that case why hadn't he already come to me with his proposal for a transfer of funds as the price for staying out of my life?

I came straight to the point. 'What can I do to ensure that I never see you again?'

He was still smiling. 'Kill me?'

It was a cool answer. In spite of everything, I felt a moment of kinship.

The shelter smelled of fried food and body odour, and Marlon only just beat me to the punch when he suggested taking a walk in a nearby wood. There was no–one else around.

As we strolled, Marlon looked me over. 'Talking of killing ...'

There was something in the rheumy eyes – genuineness? – that sent a little shiver of doubt through me. Following my usual principle, though, I hit back hard. 'I know you hated her, I remember some of the things you did. But why would I involve myself in her murder? She was always a good mom to me.'

'You are seriously kidding yourself, sport. She was a cantankerous old bitch who hated you as much as she hated me. She told us she was leaving everything to an animal charity, even showed us a draft of her new will. That's when we decided to stage a little accident.'

I have a talent for reading people, it's one of the qualities that made me so good at my job, so good at everything. I could tell from his wasted features that my brother wasn't lying. So that made me a matricide! Not the greatest thing to learn about yourself.

But I have also always been able to make drastic mental adjustments when required. Realizing that my memories of a smiling mom were selective at best – and could even be totally false, concocted as some sort of cover story after her death – I made up my mind to ditch the whole lot, along with Marlon's revelation.

Goodbye, mom. Goodbye any chance of feeling guilt.

And yet I seemed to be missing something. A crafty glint in my brother's eyes that I was unable to decypher. Another private joke at my expense. Thinking back to the ease with which I'd put the slimeball cop in his place, I almost felt sorry for Marlon.

He made his play. ‘The thing is I kept more than just the memories of what happened.’

As he continued to taunt me with a yellow–toothed smirk that was beginning to make me feel physically sick, I had one of my frequent moments of inspiration.

‘You kept the draft will.’

‘Got it in one.’ He clapped his hands in mock admiration. ‘You always were the brains of the outfit.’ He stared at me hard. ‘The whole thing was your idea, you know.’

I knew he was telling the truth.

‘I had to do the dirty work, of course. Lucky I really enjoyed it, pushing her down the basement steps and everything.’

The dreamy smile on his face spelled out another truth – that mom’s murder had been a high point in my brother’s life. I wondered if there were other such peaks. Some pretty nasty things on his charge sheet, the detective had said. For the first time, I began to appreciate how dangerous Marlon must have been, and why I had put so much distance between us.

He didn’t seem much of a bogeyman any more, though, nothing but skin and bones, the shabby suit hanging off him. My personal trainer was always telling me I looked like a cruiserweight. I could knock hell out of a punch bag. My brother no longer scared me.

But one thing wasn’t right.

‘So why didn’t you show the will to the cops when you were arrested?’

‘Shit, I only got myself arrested to grab your attention.’

Sometimes I use silence as a tactic. When anything you say is going to make you look weak or foolish, don’t say anything.

Obviously disappointed that his cryptic remark wasn’t getting the right puzzled response, Marlon explained, ‘See, I didn’t know if you had kept any memories of me. You might have given me the big heave–ho if I chased after you. But I knew that getting the cops involved would bring you running to me. You never did like leaving loose ends.’

I had another, reluctant, moment of recognizing myself in him.

‘It’s a piece of paper, nothing more. What’s to say the cops will give it the time of day?’

‘What’s to say they won’t?’ Marlon retorted. ‘And do you want to take the risk?’

I have always known when to crush and when to compromise. ‘OK, let’s cut to the chase. I repeat, what do I need to do to get you off my back?’

‘I repeat, kill me.’

SWEET DREAMS

People don't normally throw me out of kilter. Marlon was a chip off the same old block alright.

'What did you say?'

'Kill me.'

Not a bad idea, I thought.

Marlon evidently felt it was time to offer me an explanation.

'I'm dying, sport, the big C. Could be a matter of weeks.'

I worked hard to sound as if I cared. 'I'll get you the best of everything, the finest clinic. At least you can pass on in comfort and with dignity. '

'Prisons, hospitals, it's all the same shit.' Marlon pointed to an adjoining river, swollen by recent heavy rains. 'I'd rather die over there. I want you to push me in.' He gave a sly smile. 'Just like I pushed mom. I'll be washed out to sea in no time. They'll never find me or the will.'

I was glad he'd brought up the subject of most interest to me. 'How do I know you have the will?'

He pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket. It is an occasional bug with even the most expensive neural implants: though the memory itself has been wiped out, it can leave behind a latent instinct in the brain, a residue of cognizance. I somehow *knew* the note was in mom's handwriting.

'And now what's to stop me from taking it off you?'

He pulled out something else. I could see it was a small but sharp–looking knife. As I said, I've kept a few reminders of Marlon's badness. Now I recalled the time he got into trouble with the law for cutting up someone in a drunken brawl.

I have always hated being maneuvered into a corner. For it to happen at the hands of a vagrant, my waste of space of a brother, seemed especially shaming and anger–provoking.

It annoyed me even more when he read the thought almost before it crossed my mind. 'That's right, sport, it's two birds with one stone, getting rid of the evidence and the witness at the same time.'

He walked to the river's edge, and stood looking down into the fast–flowing current. I took a step towards him. 'OK, I'll admit it, I want you dead. But why has it got to be this way?'

'Because, for once, I want you to do the dirty work.'

As he held the arm with the knife down by his side, I stepped forward again and picked up a large branch that had fallen to the ground. Since I have always been a fastidiousness person, I had no choice but to use a weapon. The idea of putting my hands on Marlon's filthy body seemed utterly repugnant.

But I had scarcely thwacked him in the face, sent him tumbling into the turbulent waters, when a voice shouted out, 'Hey, what are you doing?' As someone emerged from the trees, I threw the branch towards the river and ran.

It turned out that the man was another derelict, a drunk who would have been hard pushed to identify his own mother. Of course, I couldn't deny having visited my brother, but explained that I gone there to give him money to get out of my life as quickly as possible. In my haste to get rid of him, I had prevented him from collecting his few mouldering belongings from the shelter and then dropped him off on my way back to the city.

The cops might have had their suspicions, but I was one of the good guys. Marlon's body was rotting in the ocean. The case would have been shelved for lack of evidence.

In fact, I would have got away with murder if the slimeball detective hadn't done some snooping in his spare time. Probably because they were dealing with a no–account, the official investigating team had been pretty slapdash and missed out on finding the branch. It was my own miss, however, that had been the crucial one, not quite pitching the thing all the way into the water.

Perhaps I am not so good at doing my own dirty work, after all.

But do you want to know the greatest irony? I have been at the forefront of the new sciences leading us into our brave new world. I continue to despise people who argue in favour of the past, and who hark back to when reality and fantasy could not be melded into one. I still think of the twentieth century almost as a prehistoric age.

Yet what did for me was technology from the primeval swamps.

The biological evidence was inconclusive. After the slimeball spotted specks of red on the piece of wood as it lay among some rotting vegetation at the water's edge, the cops quickly identified the blood as belonging to Marlon. And yet what did that prove? And when they found my DNA on the branch, I claimed we had shaken hands on our deal, so it could have been put there by my brother.

But then they managed to lift a fingerprint from the peeling bark ...

So now I have no choice but to mix with primitives and degenerates in this terrible place. Every day I mix with people who make the bruiser cop look like Einstein. However, it is the work of some very sophisticated minds that really bothers me. They have ensured that even leaving prison will not release me from my sentence.

It's a new initiative from the Department of Psychiatric Justice to free up space in our overcrowded jails. The aim is to enable the early release of even

major offenders into the community while continuing their punishment. And so my state of the art neural implant has been replaced with a specially doctored one that does not allow me to tamper with the past. Marlon no doubt would have been given a blank, his warming thoughts about bad deeds all wiped away.

I had of course deleted the memory of his murder before the police came calling. But my new implant carries a reconstruction of what happened.

Which means that my mind is unable to avoid playing out those last moments on the river bank. I hear the sickening thud as the branch lands. I close my eyes and see my brother's face as he topples into the water. Awake or asleep, the visions can intrude and send me into a spin.

Even the curviest blonde cannot compete.

NIGHTMARES

It's like the monkeys with typewriters: give them long enough and they'll come up with something. It might not be Shakespeare but it'll make sense. The same with nightmares: we must have millions of them around the world in any twenty–four hour period. The odds are that one or two will come true.

Until recently, I was hardly even aware that I had bad dreams. However, Toby was the complete opposite. I can recall him dredging up night frights from his schooldays, and he was always talking about the latest awfulness he'd encountered in his sleep – his dog Ben turning into a man–eating tiger, something spooky chasing him along a never–ending path, that sort of thing. I used to joke that he should stay off cheese in the evenings.

But it wasn't until he had the same nightmare over and over again that he began to take his bedtime horror stories seriously.

The funny thing is our business partnership – thanks largely to Toby's brains – was more successful than ever. We both drove flash cars. He regularly beat me at golf. He was married to the most desirable woman on the planet. Not a lot there to make a bloke wake up in a sweat.

Perhaps it was a case of too much imagination. He was always the ideas man in our team. I was the one who took care of the money.

Anyway, as I said, Toby began to show signs of freaking out. A quick discussion of his dream life had developed into a little first–thing routine between us, a few seconds of banter before we went on to more important matters. But then, one morning, he looked embarrassed when I made my usual enquiry. Muttered about being too busy to talk. I think I knew then that something was wrong.

It was the same the next morning, and the next. By the end of the week the whole office must have guessed that Toby had a problem. Normally a good–natured soul, he was now snapping at everyone who crossed his path. His secretary almost burst into tears after one particular tongue–lashing.

We played golf on the Saturday, and I thrashed him for the first time ever – it was as if he didn't care about anything any more. In fact, I had to work a lot harder trying to get the story out of him at the nineteenth hole. But finally he talked.

'You know I have good dreams, not just nightmares? The one where I can fly?'

Of course I knew, he was always going on about it. Apparently he'd been having the same dream, on and off, since he was a kid, soaring high above the ground, swooping and climbing, always feeling great.

But now, he revealed, it had changed. He was struggling to stay in the air, had the feeling that something bad was about to happen. Then he was losing height and plunging towards the earth. Always shuddering into consciousness just a split second before impact.

I was puzzled. 'But you have nightmares all the time.'

'Not like this. Not night after night. And it's so ... so *real*.'

Real enough to bring him to his senses in a blind panic. 'Squealing like a pig. Scared out of his wits. I almost felt sorry for him.'

As you might have guessed those weren't Toby's words. But they were certainly from someone who was present at the awakening.

Belinda is the name of the most desirable woman on the planet. At the time, she was Toby's wife. She was also my secret lover.

When she told me she'd moved into one of the guest rooms to escape the fallout from Toby's recurring nightmare, I gave silent thanks to whatever it is people are worshipping these days. It had bothered me that she still shared a bed with my business partner.

Though our affair had been going on for only a couple of months, I was already urging her to leave him. But Belinda was out to screw Toby for as much as she could get. That meant keeping mum about her adultery, she insisted, until after the divorce. She kept telling me she was talking to her lawyer about it.

Don't get me wrong, I liked Toby. We had been friends since our early twenties, and business partners long before Belinda showed up with her irresistible face and expensive tastes. We had started off building one of his early inventions, a gadget for boiling eggs, in the front room of his tiny rented flat. I was still living at home with my parents. Thirteen years later, with Toby still churning out innovations, we directly employed more than fifty people. I lived in a bachelor pad high above the marina and he owned a detached spread in a pleasant suburb, where he lived with his trophy wife.

As I said, I was the money man. I should have added that I'm better at spending it than anything else. Managing the accounts gave me plenty of scope for self–indulgence. It helped that Toby seemed too busy with his inventions to show any interest in the financial side of things. I believed it was because the silly bugger trusted me. After the first time with Belinda, in a fancy hotel while my partner was off somewhere sourcing his latest gadget, I knew he was mistaken on every count.

The situation between the three of us couldn't go on, of course, something had to give. I was having dreams of my own, daydreams this time, about scooping

the jackpot. Belinda, the lot. They were hazy, would probably have never come to anything, until Toby revealed that he too had been making plans.

I learned of these when he unexpectedly dropped in on me one evening. Hearing his voice over the intercom came as a bit of a shock, and I felt relieved it wasn't one of the nights when Belinda was pretending to be at the gym or visiting an old school friend. He looked wan and tired, the picture of a man who wasn't getting enough sleep. But he came straight to the point in his usual uncomplicated way.

'Look, Bob, it's time I told you that I'm thinking of throwing it in here and going to live in the States.'

I'm good at hiding stuff, including my feelings, but I must have done a fair impression of a guppy for a second or two.

'You what?'

It turned out that a mega corporation in America had been in secret conflab with him for some time. They were looking for someone to head up their Research Division and must have got wind of Toby's ability to churn out money–making ideas.

'I know it's a step back in some ways, working for someone. But they assure me that in a few years time they will give me every help in starting up my own business. Los Angeles, Bob. Just think of it!'

I *was* thinking of it, and my thoughts were poisonous.

'What about me?'

There was a whining note in my voice that made me hate myself. But I hated Toby even more.

'I'll give you the first option to buy my share of the business, of course.'

Smiling at me as if that made everything alright. We were partners, for Christ's sake! OK, I was cheating on him every which way, but *he* didn't know that.

Or did he?

It crossed my mind that perhaps he wasn't a complete financial idiot. I had stepped up my thieving from the company – what with having to pay for five star hotels, upgrade my car, dress in the most expensive threads, all to impress Belinda. Had he finally spotted the cuckoo in the nest?

Another thought came along, and this one really tested my poker face. Perhaps he knew about Belinda and me. In spite of her determination to make him bleed, had my lover been winding him up about our affair, perhaps dropped one hint too many? No, he was too honest to have done anything but storm in, all guns blazing, if that had happened.

NIGHTMARES

Maybe sleep deprivation had made him generally pissed off. Whatever the cause, it wasn't the Toby I'd always known. A look on the normally affable face that was different – and indifferent at the same time. An unprecedented fuck–you quality to it. He was even trying to make his voice sound steelier than usual.

'This is my chance to get away. Make a new start. That OK with you?'

It was then, as he trained an apparently belligerent stare on me, that I saw something flickering behind the mask. Something scared. Sensing my chance, I went on the attack.

'You're running away, aren't you?'

He was obviously too tired to put up any sort of resistance. 'It's the dream, Bob, it's getting to me. I thought a new life in the sun ...'

I went for the jugular. 'Jesus, Tob, that isn't the answer.'

I admit I expected him to cave in right away. I was about to come out with all sorts of suggestions about counselling, therapy, whatever crap came into my head. So you can imagine my surprise when his eyes steadied, the passion and defiance in them suddenly for real.

'I've made up my mind, Bob.'

I played my ace. 'What about, Belinda?' Hoping to hear he hadn't even consulted her yet, confident that she would be on my side, would soon bring him around in her own seductive way.

'Oh, she's all for it.' An almost apologetic look on his face. 'You know how she is. Probably expecting to be living next door to Tom Cruise.'

That was the straw that broke the camel's back. Or Toby's back in this case. I shoved him through the open door leading to my small balcony. The startled look in his eyes told me everything: he had no idea why he'd made me so mad. Shit, I thought, she hasn't told him. But there was no going back. I couldn't let him take everything from me. Our partnership. His wife. Let's just say I wasn't thinking very straight at that moment.

I pushed him again, hard against the balcony railing, but you have to believe me when I say that I was already having second thoughts. He had been my friend for fifteen years, after all. I'm not a natural–born killer.

But then Toby made a fatal mistake. His big brain had already put two and two together. 'You think she loves you? Don't be stupid, Bob. The only person Belinda loves is herself.'

I think it was his look of pity that made me do it.

The railing wasn't high – somebody had committed suicide by vaulting over one in an adjoining apartment block a couple of years before. Fatigue had made

Toby sluggish, too weak to put up much of a fight. A final push and he was gone. Fourteen stories to the ground. Fly, you bastard, I screamed in my head.

And that was how Toby's dream came true. It was also how my own, very different dream eventually came true.

I half expected to be arrested for murder in the days that followed, with the police hurling questions at me for hours. But one of the things I'm good at is lying. Plenty of practice, I suppose. Once I make up a story, I'm able to stick to it through thick and thin. Toby had been on the point of a nervous collapse, I told them. His stupid nightmare. He had wandered over to the balcony and stood looking down at the marina below. I'd turned my back for a moment and he was gone. I insisted it must have been an accident, a stumble perhaps – he was *so* tired. Tears in my eyes that weren't entirely crocodile.

Everyone in the office confirmed that Toby hadn't been himself for weeks, behaving erratically, acting as if he was deeply troubled. But Belinda was again my ace, and this time it worked. Looking palely beautiful, she testified that her husband had talked of being unable to cope any longer. She didn't mention the offer from America. She said I would never hurt Toby.

More than anything, it felt as if I owed her for not going public with our affair. After the coroner's jury decided it had been an accident, I thanked her in the best way I knew how.

Afterwards, she said, 'You've made me very happy.'

We both knew she wasn't talking about my love–making.

I was a bit shocked, to be honest. The blissful note in her voice didn't seem right somehow. But it was the total lack of mourning on her face that really got to me. I suddenly realised she must have meant it when she said she hated Toby. For the first time I noticed the hardness under the soft skin. I hadn't admitted even to her the truth of Toby's death, but the glorious features were almost insolently knowing. It crossed my mind that I was in her power in more ways than one.

But it was another worry that nagged away at me as we pretended to be best friend and grieving widow comforting each other in the months that followed. I felt unable to ask the question, though, until we were safely married and on our honeymoon in the Maldives.

'You wouldn't have gone with him to America, would you?'

Her look of wide–eyed reproach made me want to throw myself at her feet. 'How can you even ask that?'

We never spoke about it again; in fact, poor old Toby hardly got another mention. But every so often, especially after I upset her in some way, I could see

the knowing look back on Belinda's face and it would occur to me that she could shop me any time she wanted.

Toby's been dead for three years now. I was worried at first that the business would go downhill without him coming up with the goods. For a time I felt like Andrew Ridgeley must have done when George Michael went his separate way. But I've found other men with clever ideas. I'm a good manager and good with money and there's no need to cheat any more, it's no fun stealing from yourself.

No, if I'm honest, it's my marriage that often feels as if it's heading towards the rocks. I would still do anything for her, but Belinda seems to have gone off me. I can't help wondering if she slags me off behind my back the way she used to do with Toby.

I've even begun to think there might be another man in her life. I know from experience that she can be extraordinarily good at keeping secrets, but there have been one or two giveaway signs. Ending a phone conversation too quickly when I came into the room one evening. Returning from a weekend away, supposedly in the company of one of her female friends, with a glow on her face that reminded me of our first time in that swank hotel. She's good, but it's hard to kid a kidder.

To get her away from temptation, and in the hope of reintroducing some oomph into our marriage, I instantly agreed when Belinda suggested coming on this holiday to the Caribbean. I'm not a great one for beach holidays, being a poor swimmer and an even worse reader of airport novels, but Belinda loves nothing better than tropical sunshine and sand between her toes.

My scheme seems to be working, too, because Belinda has been much more like her old self, fondling and nuzzling me in public, laughing at my stupid jokes. Perhaps she's just making the best of a bad job, but I don't care. I still feel honoured to have her hanging off my arm.

We have become so relaxed together that we've even begun to talk about Toby for the first time in years. I think of the poor sod almost nostagically now – a classic example, I suppose, of the ability of human beings to put the bad things they've done behind them. Belinda, though, continues to show his memory no mercy.

'Of course, I didn't want him to die,' she said the other day, somehow managing to sound as if that's exactly what she wanted. 'But, you have to admit, he was *sooo* boring.'

A caress that sent the usual tingles down my arm. 'Aren't you a clever boy?'

Though she immediately changed the subject, we both knew how close we had come to talking openly about murder. I had been on the point of confessing my

sin, in fact, until I read the look on Belinda's dazzling face. For all her apparent admiration, it had been sending out a slyly different message: *Aren't I a clever girl to have you afraid that one day I'll send you to jail?*

No getting away from it, I thought, and not for the first time. She's a hard bitch and a control freak.

But what can I do?

I love her.

I killed for her.

And I have a more immediate concern at the moment. It started from the first night we arrived here. I'm having the same dream, over and again. It's the only nightmare I have ever been able to recall. I haven't mentioned it to Belinda, and she shows no signs of being aware that it's happening. I must be good at keeping a poker face even in my sleep. Certainly I'm not falling apart like old Toby.

Perhaps in a subconscious fit of wishful thinking, I'm a master swimmer in the dream, plunging to immense depths and then rising effortlessly to take in great gulps of air. This seems to go on for hours. But all of a sudden it feels as if something is holding me down, preventing me from getting to the surface. I can feel my lungs filling with water, but funnily enough I don't feel all that scared. When I jerk awake at the last moment without much more than a gasp – I'm proud of that – it always comes to me that drowning must be one of the most peaceful ways to die.

Then Toby flashes into my head, and I know it's preferable to falling from an apartment block. I think about him a lot at the moment. His nightmare. My nightmare. Trying to work out if there is any connection between them. Hoping there isn't.

Meantime Belinda carries on oblivious. She's arranged a boat trip for us this morning. She says it's to one of the many uninhabited islands in this part of the world. Just the two of us.

'It'll be like a second honeymoon,' she gushed, in a way she perhaps hasn't done since the first, illicit weeks of our relationship. Our lovemaking last night was almost ferocious in its intensity. Afterwards, she held on to me tightly, and as I looked at her smooth face it came to me that she could never send me to jail, she would incriminate herself.

For some reason, that thought was more troubling than comforting, and added to my sense that something is going on just beyond the range of my consciousness. The nightmare was more chilling than ever, driving me out of bed

to spend the hours before dawn with a bottle of rum.

The pilot of the boat, a tough–looking customer, chats to Belinda in a way that makes me wonder if they haven't met before. It's probably just drink and tiredness but I can't escape the feeling they're both laughing at me.

We've now dropped anchor close to the island. It's uninhabited alright, not another soul in sight.

'Wonderful for snorkelling,' Belinda enthuses. She is the swimmer I would like to be, a natural in the water. The pilot, too, has an easy assurance about him that indicates he is as at home under the sea as skimming over it.

I'm not sure why – my head thumping – but I tell her that I'll give the snorkelling a miss, just lie on deck and soak up the rays. It's something I normally hate doing, but I can't think of any other reason for avoiding the water. I wonder for a moment if I'll have the dream when the sun sends me to sleep. A shiver goes through my near naked torso. Belinda and the pilot are almost whispering in the background. Then they both look at me.

'You must come in, Bob,' Belinda pleads. She gives me one of those looks – all too rare nowadays – that can make me do anything.

Belinda is floating on her back and smiling as I lower myself gingerly from the boat. But it's Toby and our nightmares that I'm thinking of ...

THE FACELESS WOMAN

I haven't been back in a long time, but can still remember the impact Japan first made on me. The shock of stepping off the plane into a society that was an apparent intermingling of history and science fiction, for instance, almost immediately seeing *geisha* in traditional costume riding in a taxi with a TV screen set into the back of its seat. The *Shinkansen*, bullet train, that ran between Tokyo and other major cities was already more advanced than anything we have in Britain even today, smooth as silk and almost noiseless, looking more like a rocket to the stars than a terrestrial form of transport. And yet I moved into a house with straw mats for flooring and paper doors.

The Japanese themselves seemed able to to maintain a quite enviable balance between the future and the past, moving easily through cityscapes that gave premature hints of the special effects in *Blade Runner*, before returning to home lives that in many respects had probably altered little in centuries. Minimalist living rooms that contained Shinto shrines to the spirit world. Wives still deferring silently to husbands.

Tom Merrivale reckoned it was this last fact that gave *gaijin*, foreigners, an edge in their pursuit of what he jokingly called the local totty. Not that he hadn't grown a little out of practice himself, having been with the same woman for over ten years. Midori was perhaps a decade younger than Tom, in her early thirties, and always had a smile on her plump and pretty face. He treated her as an equal. They seemed like a very happily unmarried couple.

Tom was an old Japan hand, fluent in the language and fascinated by the culture, part of the laquered furniture. He had been living there since the age of twenty–two, and probably knew more about the place than all but a handful of expats. Originally employed in the Tokyo branch of a multinational company, he had eventually found more amenable work as a journalist with one of the English–language newpapers. By the time we met, he was an executive editor on the same paper and had also written a couple of highly praised books about Japanese folklore and mythology.

We first met at one of the interminable cocktail parties that I had no choice but to attend, two or three or four times a week. I was a second secretary at the British Embassy in Tokyo, a glorified diplomatic gopher. Since I was already having doubts about my choice of career, and had vague thoughts of becoming a writer, Tom must have seen something of himself in me. He invited me for a drink in his favourite bar, just the two of us, and our friendship developed from there.

Tom soon made it clear that he had no intention of living anywhere else in the world. 'I love the place and love the people,' he said in his posh–sounding but

unstuffy voice. ‘It’s like living with a bunch of Hobbits. Of the human race, but different somehow, if you know what I mean.’

We were eating delicious home–made Japanese food at the time, and he pointed to the chef. ‘Take her, for example.’

Midori giggled.’Please not listen to him,’ she warned me. ‘He crazy man!’ When Tom said something in Japanese, she covered her mouth with her hands and rushed into the kitchen.

Tom grinned at me. ‘See what I mean? She’s laughing her backside off in there. Can’t do it it in front of you, though. Bad manners.’

I had a habit in those days of nodding like a dog in the back of a car when I agreed with anything. ‘It’s what makes them so interesting, I suppose.’

My ego soared when Tom nodded approvingly. ‘Well spotted,’ he said.

It wasn’t long before I got a real taste of how different the Japanese could be. We were having a bit of a party in someone’s apartment and several of the locally–engaged staff had been invited. Mr Abe was one of them, a youngish and very quiet and earnest man, one of the translators at the Embassy. It should be mentioned at this point that the Japanese aren’t the world’s greatest drinkers, tending to get quite loud and boisterous after even just one or two beers. No–one seems to mind such behaviour, something to do, I suppose, with the need to let off steam in one of the most structured and ordered societies on the planet.

Perhaps it was nerves, the stress of socialising with *gaijin*, but Mr Abe went too far in his efforts to lose his inhibitions through alcohol. Red in the face, sweating, he groped and tried to kiss the blondest young woman in the room, before practically passing out and having to be helped to the bathroom, where he was heroically sick. But it was after this that the situation got really interesting. He had to be forcibly restrained from making his way to the roof of the apartment building in an attempt to atone for his rudeness by throwing himself into the busy street below.

Tom laughed when I told him. ‘Loss of face, loss of status,’ he said. ‘Just about the worst misfortunes that can befall anyone here. Do you know, when people are made redundant, or even just retire, their employers sometimes send them on special anti–suicide courses.’

Tom caught the look on my face. ‘What’s the word?’

I was picking up the language through a combination of Embassy–sponsored tuition and informal coaching from my friend and others. ‘*Omoshiroi*,’ I said.

I was pleased for two quite different reasons when he said, ‘Good lad.’

It especially flattered me that we were on the same wavelength, since Tom’s enthusiasm for his adopted country had very quickly rubbed off on me. I was

already a fan of the ancient theatrical form of Kabuki and learning calligraphy from a wizened master of the art he had recommended.

Naturally, I had also read his books on local folklore and mythology. It was fascinating stuff. Japan almost has more *kami*, which means gods or spirits, than can be considered good for it. At one time, the Japanese seem to have worshipped almost anything – from rivers and trees and rocks to their own ancestors. They must have thought the place was teeming with wandering supernatural beings, interacting with humans in all sorts of sometimes benign, sometimes malevolent ways.

Thinking of the innovative light displays in the Ginza shopping district and the bullet train and TVs in taxis, all the evidence of a country busy trampling its way into the future, I couldn't help thinking, however, that the ancient beliefs must be dying out. I put this to Tom.

'You'd be surprised,' he countered. 'Old habits die hard. Superstition has some pretty deep roots here.'

To cement my interest in all things Japanese, I had started to take an interest in one of the other students at my calligraphy class. Chieko was her name and she worked for one of the major banks. Fairly fluent in English, possessor of a master's degree, proud owner of a snappy red sports car, she seemed to be as liberated and forward–looking as any British or American girl of her age.

But when I showed her one of Tom's books, she quickly went to the index and gave a little shiver.

'*Betobeto–san*,' she murmured.

I took the book from her and read out loud. 'An invisible spirit that follows people at night, making the sound of footsteps.'

I was about to laugh when I saw her face. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. Let us talk about other things.'

She was subdued for the rest of the evening and went home early. Though she was back to her normal chirpy self when I phoned the next day, neither of us brought up the subject of *kami* again.

And so the seasons went by. Tokyo turned hot and sticky and then cold and dry. The cherry blossom in the parks burst into life and died.

By the middle of my second year at the Embassy, I felt more at home as a diplomat and less sure that I was cut out to be a writer. After reading a couple of my short stories, Tom had said, 'Well done.'

But it's one of the drawbacks of being in sync with someone, you can usually tell when they're simply being kind.

At least we still meshed in most other respects – the same interests, the same sense of humour, the same taste for Kirin beer. We were in a bar somewhere, in fact, when I first noticed the change in Tom. A droop to his shoulders that I'd never seen before.

'You look glum,' I said.

He frowned and tapped his finger against his nose, a gesture that could only have had one intent. Mind your own business, it said. The difference in our ages had never seemed important before, but all of a suddenly I felt a bit out of my depth. Luckily, Tom rescued me with a contrite half–smile.

'Sorry, Martin, but it's not something I want to discuss just now.'

That was the first cryptic clue.

Another soon followed when I dropped by their place one evening and caught Tom and Midori in the middle of what appeared to be a row. His face was flushed and she looked on the point of tears. They both regained their poise in double–quick time, but what followed was easily the most strained half hour I'd ever spent in their company. I made up a story about having a date with Chieko in order to get away.

For a time, Tom seemed to be avoiding me. Not returning my calls. Cancelling our regular tennis game at the last moment, with barely an apology. I was starting to grow concerned, though it was probably more about callow self–pity than any worry I had for my friend.

'Sod him,' I remember thinking. 'About time I found a mate my own age.'

Not meaning it in any way, shape or form, of course.

Which was why I had to suppress a little whimper of surprise and delight when he finally rang.

'Care for a drink, Martin?'

We met in one of our favourite little bars. A dim and gloomy sort of place, full of dim and gloomy middle–aged men, mostly sitting on their own. Somehow the ambience seemed to go with the look on my friend's face. After downing his beer in one go, he finally spoke.

'As you have probably guessed, my life is not at the moment a bowl of *sakuranboo*.'

'Yes, I had guessed.'

He smiled a little wanly. 'Good lad.'

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'Haven't got a gun, have you?'

I just stared at him. I had been reading about *seppuku* – suicide by ritual disembowelment – only that afternoon, and it absurdly crossed my mind that a sword would be more appropriate. As if he could read my mind, Tom laughed.

'Not for me!' A snarl in his voice that startled me. 'For her!'

Then he looked ashamed. 'Just ignore me. Don't know what I'm saying half the time these days.'

It felt as if I had a load of cryptic clues, one or two of them the size of Mount Fuji, but still no idea of the crime. Tom smiled sardonically as he saw me stumbling around in the dark. A moment's reflection, as if he was wondering whether to pile on the agony, before the really big shock.

'I'm thinking of going back home. The UK.'

My response owed nothing to my Foreign Office training. 'You're fucking joking!'

At least it made him laugh out loud. 'No.'

'But why? What on earth has happened?'

His reply made such little sense that he could have been speaking advanced Japanese. 'Midori wants to get married.'

My stare asked, What's the problem?

'The trouble is, I don't.'

In the silence that followed, I could hear one of our fellow customers slurping his drink.

'Oh, I know what you're thinking. Why doesn't he just marry the poor cow?' There was an anguish on his face that struck me as being out of proportion to the problem. 'The trouble is I tried it before, not long after I first got here. A fellow Brit, she was. Ditched me for a fellow I worked with after we'd been married for a year. I swore then I would never tie the knot again.'

My diplomatic persona had re–asserted itself. 'Lots of people have a second go and it works. My auntie swears by her second husband.'

'I know I'm being stupid,' Tom said miserably.

'The two of you get on so well together. I can tell she adores you. And you feel the same about her.'

Tom looked almost apologetic. 'Ah, now that's the other problem ...'

'Oh, Christ,' I said.

'I mean I like her a hell of a lot. But somehow this whole business has made me see her in a new light. A bit of a shrew, if you know what I mean.'

I was annoyed with him, I have to admit. For a few delicious seconds, it felt as if I was the wise old head and he was an exasperating child.

'But leaving Japan. That's crazy talk. I thought you would have married Godzilla to stay here.' Then a thought struck me. 'Anyway, why do you have to get married at all? Why can't you just leave her?'

Tom, his face screwed up in a sort of pout, was even beginning to resemble a small boy. 'That's yet another problem.' A long pause. 'In fact, the main one. She's mentioned not wanting to live if I leave her.'

I had the mischievous urge to slash my finger across my throat, but restrained myself. 'You mean ...'

As usual, we were on the same wavelength. 'Yes.'

'She'd never do it. Call her bluff.'

'I daren't risk it.'

A futher illogicality struck me. 'If she does do it, what difference will it make if you're in the UK or Japan?'

'Don't you see, I could never stay here with that on my conscience?'

We seemed to have travelled full circle and I wanted to shake my friend until his bleary eyes popped out. My temper finally getting the better of me, I completely forgot all protocols of age and status. 'Well, marry her then, you stupid so–and–so!'

The next day, he rang me.

'I've decided to follow your advice. You're absolutely right, I could never leave Japan.'

'So you're going to marry her?'

'No, call her bluff.'

I helped him move his stuff to the furnished apartment he was temporarily renting. I could hear Midori weeping loudly next door, but she never showed her face. As we were leaving, Tom called out, 'Sorry'. She shrieked something back, the noise rising to a ear–splitting crescendo, and for a moment I had a vision of her galloping out of the bedroom with a knife in her hand. Perhaps Tom had the same picture in his head, because he was well ahead of me as we hurried to his car.

The French Embassy threw one of it's big cocktail parties not long after. I knew Tom had been invited, but there was no sign of him. On being told by his office that he hadn't been in for days, I went around to his new apartment after work. When he opened the door, he looked unwell, the bags under his eyes more like suitcases.

'Haven't been able to sleep much,' he explained. 'And when I do, I'm getting these strange dreams.'

I had been receiving bulletins from a mutual friend and so knew that Midori was still very much alive. ‘You’re doing the right thing,’ I soothed.

I decided to embroider the facts a little. ‘I’ve heard she’s getting better by the day.’ Then a risky touch of humour. ‘She’s taken to saying, Tom who?’

Silence. Not a flicker of a smile. I could tell from his breath that he’d been drinking whisky – lots of it from the smell – and not his usual Kirin. But it was the overwrought expression on his face that was beginning to bother me the most. I tried to think of a word to describe it, and finally came up with one that seemed just right. Haunted.

Looking for a way to get him to open up, I asked, ‘What sort of dreams?’

He shivered. ‘The sort you don’t want.’

‘What does that mean?’

But he wasn’t listening, his gaze fixed on the far wall, muttering something under his breath. Apparently the same word, over and again. I could just about tell it was Japanese. Suddenly, by the most tremendous effort, he seemed to pull himself together.

‘I know she’s still crying. I know it isn’t getting better for her. I know ...’

Then I realised he wasn’t staring blankly at the wall, as I’d thought. Instead his eyes seemed drawn to a picture that must have come with the apartment, a cheap print of a scene from Japanese mythology.

My reading had given me a vague idea of what was going on. The woman dressed in white is actually a demon, I told myself. My friend immediately cottoned on, his face suddenly looking less strained.

‘It’s the legend of the Snow Bride.’

He even showed the trace of a smile. ‘You remember, she threatens to kill her husband when it next snows.’

Then, unexpectedly, he laughed. ‘Lucky for me it’s summer, eh?’

My own spirits lifted by his sudden revival, I couldn’t resist correcting him. ‘You’re not married, remember?’

He laughed again. ‘Well spotted.’

His eyes shifted, and now he was looking at the hundreds of books in a large bamboo bookcase, almost all them connected in some way with Japan and its weird and wonderful customs.

‘No, not really appropriate in my case. But that’s not to say there isn’t another ... um, story ... that would fit the bill.’

‘You’ve lost me.’

‘*Noppera–boo*.’

I recognised it as the word he'd been repeating, but that only confused me even more.

Tom looked cheerfully disappointed with me. 'How easily they forget.'

He ushered me towards the front door. 'Look it up when you get home.'

I was gratified to see him a million times brighter than when I'd arrived, but would have welcomed an explanation for the seemingly miraculous turnaround. However, he was already closing the door in my face.

'Sorry, but there's something I have to do.'

It took me only seconds to find the legend in Tom's first book. *Noppera–boo.* The faceless woman.

'*Variously described as a demon, spirit or ghost',* I read, *'the faceless woman has featured in Japanese mythology for a very long time. She is generally considered to be a harbinger of impending doom. She can appear in dreams, or even be seen by people as a living person, often someone they know. But her face soon fades away and they realise they are in contact with an entity that is not human. If they ignore her warnings to change their ways, then something disastrous will happen to them and perhaps others.'*

I immediately phoned Tom. He still sounded in high spirits.

'Martin, my friend! How goes it?'

'Your dreams ...'

An immediate change of mood. 'Yes, they are always of Midori crying. I am walking towards her and then she turns away for a second. When she turns back ... nothing, her face has become a complete blank.' I could almost see him shudder. 'Horrible!'

'You don't think it's just your imagination working overtime?' I said. 'You know, all this stuff with Midori going round and round in your head, mixing itself up with one of your Japanese ghost stories. Turning into a perfectly understandable nightmare.'

'Well, I might agree with you, but for one thing. Almost as soon as you left, something induced me to look out of the window and I saw her across the street. Midori. Bawling her eyes out. Then she looked away for a second, and I knew exactly what was coming. I didn't wait to see the next bit.'

'Oh.'

'I was wide awake, Martin.'

You were also still drunk, I wanted to say.

To my surprise, he was bouncing again.

'Anyway, I have an announcement to make.'

But I was still thinking of what he'd told me. 'And how do you know that wasn't the real Midori in the street? She must have found out where you live.'

'If you stop and listen to me for a moment, all will become clear.'

'And what if ...'

'Stop!'

With the authority back in his voice, I resumed my place as the junior member in our partnership. 'Sorry.'

'I phoned Midori within minutes of seeing the thing in the street. I was going to do it anyway, actually. Couldn't take any more of those dreams. Worried sick about what might happen to her. And to me, to tell the truth. Anyway, she was at home.'

I knew what was coming, but had to ask. 'And your announcement?'

'We're back together!'

What a surprise, I thought.

I wasn't best man at the wedding, that honour went to one of Tom's journalist chums, someone much closer to him on the totem pole. I was only too pleased to be overlooked. The main thing was that Tom and Midori seemed very happy in their redefined relationship.

'Can't think why I was so worried,' Tom told me. 'Turns out the old girl wasn't in the least bit suicidal. But it doesn't matter a jot. Good old *Noppera–boo*!'

It was only a matter of time before I got a posting away from Tokyo. Rome, on promotion. I had already decided that my future lay along the road of diplomacy and not literature. I was sorry to leave the place, of course, source of so much amusement and bemusement to me. It was even harder saying goodbye to my good friends, and I stayed in touch with Tom and Midori for many years afterwards.

One person who probably wasn't in the least bit sorry to see me go was Chieko. My empathy with Tom ran deep indeed. As happened in his first relationship in Japan, Chieko had decided she preferred one of my work colleagues. It's too far back to remember exactly, but I might even have felt a little pang about not having my own *Noppera–boo* experience.

SNOW

I hated everything about winter at home. The endless evenings. The feeling of cold in the bones. Above all, I hated snow. Sinister, dangerous stuff that covered everything like a winding–sheet. Likely to send you tumbling as soon as it froze. To my mind, ice only has a purpose when it's sloshing in gin on a scorching afternoon.

My wife Meryl agreed with me. In fact, we have always been a sunshine sort of couple. Not that we got to see much of the stuff in the old days. Our best bet for some decent tanning was to go abroad. Something that scarcely ever happened, however, since neither of us were earning much, just about enough to keep us afloat.

So the need to boost our income was the main reason for taking in Meryl's mum. Well, it was my main reason (my only reason, in fact). Meryl, for her sins, felt obliged to look after her mother. Even harder to understand was that she actually seemed to love her.

Since the alternative was some rundown retirement home or other, you think the old lady would have shown a modicum of gratitude. However, she was soon treating us like the hired help. Incompetent hired help, at that. When she was at her complaining worst, I had to bite my lip more than once for Meryl's sake. I could tell the evil witch felt the same way about me, a look of disgusted sufference on her face whenever she ordered me around.

She was even reluctant to give us a portion of her pension every week, I could tell, as if she thought we ought to be looking after her for free. But the one good thing was that the extra money made all the difference to our household budget. We even began to save towards a week away. But the old lady looked horrified when we suggested going on holiday to Spain.

'Abroad?' she said. 'Don't like it.'

I was secretly pleased. The last thing I wanted was for her to come along. To put it mildly, she wasn't a summer person. It used to drive me mad, listening to her complain about our infrequent warm spells. She must be the the only person I've ever met who found blue skies depressing.

So after we talked her into going into a home for a few days – and we only managed that by waiting on her hand and foot for weeks – it should have been bliss spending time on our own in the sun. But it turned out to be the opposite, with Meryl fretting about the old lady, while I was dreading our return to hag–ridden reality.

To add to my gloom, it was chilly and raining when we got off the plane. They were forecasting an atrocious winter ahead, the most artic in years. And when

temperatures finally began to plummet outside, we hit another snag. I knew the old lady actually seemed to enjoy the cold, insisted on going for what she called her evening constitutionals, hobbling along on her stick whatever the weather. But it turned out that she also had a thing about central heating.

'It's too hot,' she kept grumbling, until Meryl agreed to turn the thermostat down with my all–too–reluctant blessing. It was then, as I sat in a thick sweater in my own living room, that I realised I hated the old bitch.

Christmas was approaching, I remember, when our world changed. The first snows had already arrived, wrapping me in an acute depression. Painfully aware of the interminable freeze to come, I felt like a prisoner in a cell, counting down the days to my release. To make matters worse, I was locked in with an evil witch.

I hate Christmas, anyway, especially since we haven't got any kids. What lunatic decided to put an important public holiday in the vilest part of the year?

So, as you can imagine, I was feeling a bit out of sorts.

And then one of Meryl's tickets won the lottery.

Even her mother looked pleased as I whirled my wife around the living room after seeing the draw on TV. Probably thinking she wouldn't have to give us any more of her pension. I was happy for very different reasons. Six million of them.

We immediately began a friendly argument about the location of our dream home.

'Florida?'

'No, it's got to be the Canaries!'

The one thing we agreed on was that it would have to be a place with one season missing. Anywhere, basically, that didn't have a winter.

One snag, however, in the shape (if you could call it that) of someone who thought people ought to be able to see their breath inside the house as well as out. I should have seen it coming, I suppose.

'I don't like abroad.'

Dump her in an expensive home, I badly wanted to tell Meryl. Let's go. Somehow the words never emerged. Needless to say, her mother won. 'I couldn't just leave her,' my caring but foolish wife protested. Looking meaningfully over to where the wrinkled form was peering short–sightedly at the TV. 'Anyway, it won't be for long.'

It certainly wouldn't be if I had anything to do with it, I thought. At the same time there was a sick feeling in my gut that the old bitch would see the both of us out.

What else could I do? It was Meryl's win, remember, the money wasn't mine to spend. Anyway, I could never leave her to the untender clutches of the old lady. So we did the next best thing and bought a big place in the country, allowing me to luxuriate in top–notch central heating while my enemy festered in the cold in a granny annexe with a separate front door.

It was wet and nasty January by then, but every evening the witch hobbled off for her evening constitutional in the garden that encircled the house and seemed to go on for miles. She insisted on Meryl keeping her company, of course, and my heart always went out to my martyred wife as they commenced their trudge into the darkness. Even when Meryl caught a cold and had to stay in bed for a day or two, the stubborn old witch refused to forgo her long–time habit. As reluctant to be alone with me as I was to be alone with her, she retorted peevishly to my half–hearted offer.

'No need.'

In spite of our much improved circumstances. I could see that my wife was beginning to feel the strain of looking after the old lady almost as much as me. We could have afforded nursing help now, but naturally the witch was dead set against the idea.

'Couldn't bear a stranger touching me,' she said with an exaggerated shudder.

I think the weather, too, was beginning to get the both of us down, with further heavy snow forecast for later in the month. It must have been in an effort to cheer herself up that Meryl came out with the idea of having a nose job.

I whole–heartedly encouraged her. 'It's something you've always wanted to do. Plus you'll get a couple of days away from here.' Wondering at that moment if there were parts of my own body that could do with improving.

Knowing she would be losing one of her slaves for a while, the witch predictably sneered. 'What do you want to look pretty for? You've managed up till now.'

I only just stopped myself from suggesting that she should have some knife work done on her tongue.

Almost as predictably, Meryl worried about her mother. 'You will make sure she takes her medicine when I'm not here, won't you?'

Where can I get hold of arsenic? I thought.

Meryl went into the expensive London clinic towards the end of January. Though it wasn't strictly necessary, I had persuaded her, with some difficulty, to book herself in for a two night stay.

SNOW

Naturally, the old lady made it clear that she had no intention of leaving the house to be with her daughter. ‘Hate the place,’ she sniffed. ‘Full of foreigners.’

And so, loathing every minute of it, I had no choice but to stay with her. We both made sure we saw as little of each other as possible.

I had just come off the phone with Meryl – the operation had been a complete sucess – when I looked out the window and saw the evil witch emerge from her front door, leaning heavily on her stick. Off for her evening constitutional in spite of the snow that was beginning to fall.

A TV weatherman was chuntering away in the background, and I picked up the words, ‘Blizzard conditions are predicted very shortly in ...’ He named our part of the country. And even as he said it, I could see the flakes come down more heavily, a white pall already cloaking the shoulders of the old lady’s black coat.

Thinking that she couldn’t have seen the news, I was half way to the door to warn her of the impending snowstorm when I told myself it would be a waste of time. The stubborn old witch would just snap at me and carry on with her walk. However, I have to admit that there was something else lurking in my mind. A malignant sort of hope. So I sat back down and watched TV for a couple of hours, until it was time to give her her medicine.

My heart was beating fast as I knocked on the door to her annexe. No answer. I went in. No sign of the old lady. I let out my breath in a whooping sound, compounded of relief and guilt, I suppose.

I telephoned the police not long after to say the old lady had gone missing. They found her body the next day, buried in a deep snowdrift in a corner of our huge garden. I told the inquest that she had agreed not to go out after my warning. A distraught Meryl confirmed that she never listened to other people. The coroner concluded that it would have been easy to lose sight of the house in a blizzard in the dark.

Accidental death.

You know my opinion of snow. But until recently not a day went by when I didn’t thank the stuff for enabling us to live on this beautiful Caribbean island. Now she has recovered from the shock, I suspect even Meryl is glad about what happened.

The first few weeks of tropical sunshine were perfect, in fact, swimming and walking hand–in–hand with Meryl along deserted beaches under the largest moon either of us have seen. But then this dream started and now I hate snow more than ever. It is always the same, except for one dreadful detail. I am stranded alone in a wintry wilderness under a sulphurous sky and a blurred figure is hobbling towards me out of a blizzard. It gets closer every time ...

SNOW

After being woken by my screams three nights running, Meryl is growing worried about me. I am *terrified* about me, because the horror of the dream seems to be spilling over into the real world. Even with the sun beating down, I can break into violent shivers as we sit around our pool. Glass surfaces are freezing to the touch. The other day I slipped on what for a second seemed like a patch of ice on the path.

The weirdest sensation, though, is what I am starting to see. A vague, indefinable shape that at first only ever appeared in the distance, looking like a scrap of paper blowing in the wind – even when no wind existed. But the object is looming closer, growing larger, and has reached the stage of resembling a large piece of fluttering white cloth. I caught a sideways glimpse of it as I strolled in our garden this morning, palely loitering behind a tree, and sensed rather than saw something bleak and twisted before I turned and ran. Ever since then, I can't get the words out of my head.

Blackness in a shroud.

The prospect of waking from a nightmare and seeing the thing at the bottom of our bed scares me to death.

White as a sheet. The words make me think of ghosts.

Something even worse.

White as snow.

A WOMAN'S TOUCH

Robert Hillman was in his late twenties when his mother suddenly died. He had thought they would be together for another thirty years at least. He was devastated.

Robert wasn't married. With one exception, women had always scared him. Even after he left school, he only felt safe and secure when he was at home, eating her delicious roasts and watching soaps together in their spotless front room. He was grateful to his mother for putting up with him for so long. She never once criticised his choice of bachelorhood.

Until towards the end.

'I don't like the idea of leaving you on your own,' she began to say. 'Should have got someone trained up years ago.'

Almost the last thing she said to him had been, 'You need someone, Robert. Someone like me.'

Robert often thought of those words as he passed her on his way to work. It was a great comfort to him that they remained so close in one respect at least; and he often ate his lunchtime sandwiches while sitting next to her grave. She was still the only woman he could talk to.

Not that he was any good with men either. In fact, old Sam was the nearest he had to a friend. They had been a team for almost a dozen years. Neither of them was a chatterbox and they were able to go for days without exchanging more than a handful of remarks. But they both loved their job, in the open air and away from other people.

He didn't even want to take time off when his mother died. Their boss had to insist on it. Sam got one of others to help with digging her grave. It felt very strange after the ceremony, watching someone else shovel earth onto the coffin.

After he got back to work, Sam showed his feelings just once.

'Bad luck, mate.'

Robert told himself his mother would have wanted him to carry on; she had often talked about life being being a vale of tears. Well, he certainly did his share of weeping in the months that followed her death. Then there were all the difficulties of living on his own for the first time. Having to cook and wash his clothes. Sometimes he thought it was only the job that kept him going.

But then old Sam died.

Thinking about it afterwards, Robert decided it was the way his friend would have wanted to go. He sometimes drank in the boozer near the cemetery, always sitting on his own in the same corner, and then using his key to open the gates in

order to take the short cut home. The landlord reported that he'd been more drunk than usual on the night it happened. The cemetery had no lights and there'd been torrential rain for several hours.Sam must have wandered off the path. The hole, dug ready for a funeral next day, was full to the brim with water. It was an accident waiting to happen, the coroner said.

Robert tried to think positive. After all, the old man had died in one of his own graves.

He, on the other hand, had never felt more desolate. He also worried about his next partner. None of the other diggers were to his taste, loud and aggressive cavemen who never stopped talking and despised him because he didn't drink or gamble or look up the dresses of female visitors. He knew his nickname among them was 'Mummy's Boy'.

'Except he hasn't got a mummy,' he'd overheard one of them sneer.

At least the boss didn't take long to put him out of his misery. Robert almost fell off his spade when he saw them coming towards him. Either that's a short man, he thought. Or ...

It was a girl.

'Equal rights,' the boss said, with a look on his face that seemed to indicate he had just seen one of their corpses rise up and walk. Then he left them to it.

Jess was her name. One thing pleased Robert as they self–consciously shook hands and made their introductions. She was blushing and stammering almost as much as him. He also noted with approval that she was nearly as wide as she was tall, with meaty upper arms and calves. Putting away any thought of having to do most of the work, he took her through the training, which largely consisted of showing her how to hold the shovel.

Scarcely another word passed between them before they began to dig their first grave together.

Jess went at it with such enthusiasm that he had to rein her back a couple of times. 'The others don't like it,' he explained. 'It'll make the boss think everyone should go as fast as us.'

A little thrill of pleasure went through him as he noted the look of contempt on her moon face It exactly mirrored his own feelings about their co–workers.

That brought him to yet another plus about Jess. She wasn't pretty. If she had been, Robert decided, he'd have been able to to use his tongue for a belt. She wasn't ugly exactly, more homely. Just like mother, he told himself. There were no end of pleasant surprises on this sunny July afternoon, in fact. The succeeding days

weren't so bad either. With a minimum of idle talk, they quickly settled into a comfortable routine. So comfortable that, as he prepared his egg soldiers one morning, Robert caught himself whistling for the first time in months.

They had worked together for several weeks before they swapped any personal information about themselves.

'I'm an only child,' Jess told him.

'So am I!' Robert exclaimed.

'I don't get on well with my mum.'

It was the first major difference between them. So as not to make her feel bad, Robert forebore from telling the girl that his mother had been his whole life.

'Oh, that's a shame.'

'That's why I'm living on my own in a grotty bedsit.'

As Jess turned away – they still found it difficult to look at each other for longer than a nanosecond – a thought came to Robert that was so enormous that it quite literally staggered him. He had to sit down on a heap of freshly–dug earth.

His mind took several days to adjust to the idea, and then he began to devise elaborate speeches that never got anywhere near his tongue. He grew so preoccupied, wondering if he would ever find the courage to speak, that the agreeable trickle of communication between them dried up completely. After getting nothing but grunts for a whole morning, Jess quietly asked, 'Have I upset you?'

To his horror, Robert heard himself saying, 'Wh – why d – don't you come and st – stay with me?' He was stammering so badly that the words hardly made sense even to him.

But it was clear Jess understood, her face suddenly resembling a scarlet beach ball. Which somehow seemed appropriate, since the silence that followed made Robert feel as if he was drowning.

'OK,' Jess finally said.

She moved in the next day.

The cavemen were soon sniggering about them, Robert knew, but he didn't care. It just felt wonderful to have someone in the house again. A female presence.

He was so excited that he even showed Jess his mother's bedroom, which he'd kept untouched, as a shrine. It pleased him that she showed the proper respect. 'You must have loved her lots.'

'It was more than that.' He considered whether to say it. Then: 'I *worshipped* her.'

He was worried about coming across as weird, but she said, 'You were very lucky to have her for a mum.'

The choice of their own bedrooms led to a minor dispute. When Robert suggested giving up his own, slightly larger one, Jess insisted there was no need. The look of determination on her face came as a pleasant surprise. He gave in, naturally.

And so, still without a great deal of conversation, they settled in together. After submitting herself to one of his dinners, burned meat and half–raw potatoes, Jess apologetically offered to do most of the cooking. Robert made feeble protests for a time, but finally subsided into a grateful silence when she did the second–best Sunday roast he had ever tasted.

The return of polishing and cleaning triggered further fond memories. He had dragged a duster over the furniture perhaps twice since his mother's death. Jess soon changed all that. The signs were there from the start. The wrinkle of her nose when she saw the state of the kitchen, then her look of utter distaste as she ran her finger along the mantleshelf in the living room.

Not long after, she asked, 'Do you mind if we do some cleaning this weekend?'

'Sorry, I'm not so houseproud since ... well, you know.'

He was delighted when Jess took the lead. It was a familiar role for him, a private taking orders. Just like the old days.

'Would you mop the bathroom floor, please, Robert? And scrub the paintwork on all the upstairs doors.'

Her tone was mild but firm, as if she quite enjoyed her new officer duties. It was good to get praise from her; and even more thrilling when she tut tutted at something he'd missed.

At the end of a long afternoon, Robert thought even his mother would have been satisfied by the result. With one exception. A little disappointed by the oversight, he was about to put away the cleaning stuff when Jess said, 'Damn, we haven't cleaned between the ironwork on the bannisters!'

Robert wanted to hug her.

The dynamic between them began to change. Not so much at work, where he continued to play the role of old Sam. In the house, though, Jess was the one in charge. Sometimes she seemed to have a sixth sense about how he wanted her to behave. At the cemetery she was still intimidated by the cavemen, their cracks about her size, her weight, being a woman. But she was getting to be the complete

opposite at home, as if she took on a whole new personality when she walked through the front door.

Naturally, he encouraged every sign of assertiveness. He particularly liked the peevishness that sometimes crept into her voice. The way she snapped at him when he forgot to put the toilet lid down that one time! But Jess wasn't stupid. He could tell she was beginning to notice his secret pleasure. After he deliberately left his coffee cup in the sink two days running, she voiced her suspicion.

'Sometimes I think you enjoy being told off, Robert.'

He suddenly wanted to tell her everything. No, he decided, she'll think I'm strange.

Things were anyway progressing as he wanted. Jess still didn't shout, much, but the latent shrewishness in her was becoming more and more apparent. He did everything to encourage it. A high point was when he left streaks of toothpaste in the bathroom sink and she looked for a moment as if she wanted to scream at him. He marvelled that a shy and socially awkward young woman was so readily turning into a domineering bully.

The temptation to tell her was growing stronger. Then perhaps they could go a step or two further. He was reminded of something he'd seen on a reality TV show, where people acted out their fantasies. Role play, they'd called it. Harmless fun.

He sometimes suspected she had already guessed the truth; because any possible comparison with the old days seemed to bring out an intense competitive streak in her. After being told his mother made the best casserole ever, Jess wasn't satisfied until Robert put her own effort into number one place. They'd had casserole three nights running and he would have said anything by then. But he couldn't fault her determination to bend him to her will.

One day, as they were digging, Jess asked, 'What was your mother like?'

Robert straightened up. 'She was the best mother in the world.'

'I know that, you're always saying it. But what was she *like*?'

She was always very loving, made a lovely home for both of us.' He hesitated, then finally got out the words he had been rehearsing for weeks. 'But sometimes she could be strict with me.'

Jess stared. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, I wasn't always a good boy.'

He could almost see the cogs turning, and her voice came out slow. 'The same problem as you've got now, you mean? Not doing things properly?'

'Yes.'

Silence, and for a dreadful moment he thought she was going to laugh. Then, to his relief, a scowl crossed her features.

'What exactly is your game, Robert?'

I want you to be my mother.

He never got the words out, but could tell from her expression that she at least half understood.That evening she was more officious than usual. At one point, after he spilled water on the freshly cleaned kitchen floor, she refused to speak to him for an hour. He was tempted to ask if she wanted him to go to his room. Admittedly, it had been one of mother's milder punishments. But things were definitely heading in the right direction.

They never spoke about his mother again. She never asked and he didn't want to push his luck. It was as if she didn't need to know any more. Woman's intuition, he supposed. Certainly some sort of instinct seemed to be telling her how to treat him. Every evening it was the same. Do this, Robert. Don't do that, Robert. Finding one fault after another.

He no longer had to make mistakes on purpose. Even the way he slouched while watching TV could bring on a reprimand. The really good thing was that most of the time, it appeared to him, she wasn't just throwing herself into her role. The fire in her eyes when she was especially annoyed was genuine enough to send tremors of excitement through him.

The first time she slapped him might have been the most joyous moment of his life. Better than the worst hiding from his mother. He wondered about this afterwards. Much of it came, he supposed, from his huge sense of release after the long months of anticipation. But perhaps even more pleasurable was his feeling of a job well done. Mother had happened to him. Everything between them had been an accident of birth. But it felt as if he had *created* the new Jess.

She might have been his monster, but he was her willing slave. He spent a good deal of his working days wondering how she was going to humiliate him in the evening. She was always suspicious when he looked happy, but it was sometimes hard to keep the smile of anticipation off his face.

After the slap, wanting more of the same, Robert decided to reveal some of the stuff his mother had done to him – pulling his hair, smacking him across the legs with a ruler, sending him to sit in the cupboard under the stairs for hours on end – and Jess looked a little in awe at first. But she soon recovered, and it quickly became evident that the competition with her predecessor was still in full swing. It also became clear that she intended to be an innovator, was going to make him suffer in different ways. More painful ways.

A WOMAN'S TOUCH

A heavy plastic coat hanger became her favourite means of physical chastisement, wielded with her considerable bulk behind it. Once, twice, three times on his backside. Her psychological methods, though, were possibly even more excruciating. He had formerly been sent to his room many a time for some minor infraction or other, and Jess continued the practice. But in the old days he had been able to watch TV with the sound turned down, while listening out for his mother's footsteps on the stairs. Jess ordered him to relocate his set permanently to the kitchen so she could watch it while she was cooking.

Even her cleaning mania reached hitherto unknown heights of torture.

Mother had never bothered too much about the garage; it was the one area where she'd allowed him some latitude. But, as soon as she saw the jumble, Jess decided half the contents had to go, and practically frogmarched him to the phone to order a skip. Most of it was rubbish, he had to admit, but there were things he had owned for much of his life. The dartboard he'd received on his twelfth birthday. Fishing rods, some of his favourite tools for tinkering with his old banger.

Her crowning triumph was getting him to sweep up the leaves in the road outside their house, the neighbours staring curiously from their windows as he started to shovel the deposit of several trees into numerous black bags. He got his reward, however, when Jess's round face took on such rosy satisfaction that she almost looked pretty for a moment. The Queen is dead, the expression seemed to say, long live the Queen. He wondered if she would soon be ordering him to demolish the shrine. He knew he wouldn't refuse.

Not long after, she turned on one of the cavemen who was joking about her weight.

'Fuck off!'

If looks could kill, Robert thought, we'd have to start digging a hole right away. There were very few taunts after that.

Robert, too, was tending to keep his trap shut. The situation at home had reached the stage where a word out of place – talking during one of her shows, any sort of opinion with which she disagreed – could bring on verbal retribution at the very least. What they were doing no longer seemed like role play. He wondered if it ever had been. He often detected a glint in Jess's eyes that indicated she was getting easily as much pleasure from her tyrannical behaviour as him.

Any lingering doubts were removed when she switched from plastic to wire coathangers, using them on on his thighs until she raised ugly red welts, often laughing as she doled out her punishment. Mother had never laughed. But that was

just Jess's way. I'm a bad boy, Robert told himself. Mother knew it. Now Jess knows it. We're a match made in heaven. One who likes getting what he deserves, the other who likes dishing it out.

But one question loomed ever larger in his mind. Exactly how much *did* he deserve?

For all her bullying, his mother had set parameters. Limits. There had been truces. She hugged as well as hit him. In a perverse sort of way, he had always felt completely safe with her. Now, however, he was permanently on eggshells. It was like being locked in a cage with an unpredictable wild animal.

That was half the pleasure, perhaps, but where would it stop? Where would *she* stop?

It made no difference. He was her slave.

Which made it all the more difficult to prevent himself from blabbing when, as if to make sure she hadn't missed a trick, was definitely the Queen, Jess asked a second question about his mother.

'What was the most painful thing she ever did to you?'

Robert sensed danger right away. It wasn't something she did, he had an almost irresistible urge to say, it was something she used to scream at me. With his mother, of course, it had ended there, remained nothing but a supremely wounding form of words. But his new mistress? She so badly wanted to be the worst thing that had ever happened to him!

He shivered as Jess stared at him, demanding an answer. The words were already forming in the icy space between them.

I could kill you sometimes, Robert.

SURPRISE

There were six of them crammed in the minivan, while a larger vehicle followed on with several cameramen and technicians and a mass of equipment. They had turned off the road and were bumping along a gravel track, the headlights picking out closely–packed trees on either side. He told himself the house had to be close by. He was already wishing ego and money hadn't led him into accepting the invitation.

'Looking forward to it?' asked the corpulent psychic medium pressed against him.

'There's not going to be any *it*,' Fowles answered, emphasising the last word.

He could just make out the woman's eyes open wide in mock surprise. 'Of course, you're the token sceptic.'

The earnest young man who had been introduced to him as a parapsychologist spoke up from behind them. 'Yes, you don't believe in any any of this, do you?' He sounded genuinely curious. 'And yet you're an author of horror and supernatural fiction.'

Fowles clicked his teeth impatiently. 'The clue is in the word fiction, my friend. It's like asking a writer of historical novels why he doesn't wear fancy dress and live without electricity.'

The medium was still teasing him. 'So you don't believe in things that go bump in the night?'

He made a bad job of hiding his contempt. 'Ghouls and demons only exist in our heads.'

The parapsychologist sounded even more curious. 'So why have you agreed to do this, then?'

Robin, the show's presenter and executive producer, grinned back at them from the driver's seat.

'Personally, I find hard cash always does the trick.'

Grateful to find another cynic among the crackpots, Fowles laughed. 'Damn right.'

The double line of trees soon came to an end and the house loomed out of the darkness. After a short drive through what looked more like a wilderness than an extensive garden, they found themselves staring at a series of shuttered windows. Fowles wondered when there had last been a light in the house. It was sprawling but not at all what he'd been expecting. Except for its location, out in the wilds, and obvious signs of abandonment, the place could have been a substantial

property in any well–to–do suburban neighbourhood. Attractive young Sadie, the presenter/producer's assistant, voiced the same sentiment. 'Not exactly a haunted castle, is it?'

In any sense of that phrase, Fowles thought.

While the technical people set up temporary lighting and their various bits of ghost–hunting machinery, Robin gathered his cast together for a last–minute briefing in the spacious but dust–smothered hallway. He addressed the concern that was probably uppermost in several minds. 'Ignore what you see. OK, this place is fairly modern and hasn't got a hundred wood–panelled rooms and secret passages everywhere. But just accept that strange things have happened here.'

The medium's voice conveyed an almost orgasmic sense of excitement. 'Oooh, I'm already sensing something very odd about this house.'

Fowles was disappointed to see young Sadie shiver and even Robin nod his head in agreement. He suddenly felt extremely outnumbered.

Then he remembered what he was there for, to inject some sanity into proceedings, a spot of plain talking. 'Must say it looks pretty ordinary to me. A touch of paint and some furniture and I wouldn't mind living here myself.'

Robin was pleased. 'That's it, James. That's what we want, you pouring cold water over everything. That way, when the big finale comes ...'

Not for the first time since he'd been hired to do the show, Fowles wondered if there was some sort of jiggery–pokery going on. A setup. Never believe anything you see on TV, he told himself. Smoke and mirrors. The camera always lies.

'You sound very certain something is going to happen. Are you sure you've never been here before?' he asked suspiciously.

'Hand on heart, this is my first time. In fact, so far as I know, we are the first people to set foot in this place in almost three years.'

Fowles was tempted to laugh during the weighty silence that followed. But then the sixth member of the company – he recalled her being introduced as Sandra, a psychic artist, whatever that was – spoke for almost the first time since their late–night departure from outside the television company building.

'Could we get started, please? I'm like Veronica.' She nodded towards the medium. 'I can feel something very strange going on.'

'Not so fast,' Bryan, the parapsychologist, piped up. 'Could you just refresh us on what *has* actually happened in this house, Robin?'

'Yes, well, that's just it. No–one can say for certain. Brandon Atwell, the last owner, isn't willing to divulge the details of what went on during his time here.

The same goes for his family. But there was definitely some extreme paranormal activity involved, noises and doors opening and shutting without explanation, you know the sort of thing. The owner before Atwell, who was apparently some sort of reclusive bachelor businessman, seems to have died of a heart attack. Our research has revealed that he, too, had seen and heard things. Apparently, he ran through several staff during the eighteen months he lived in the house. None of them hung about for very long.'

Have you heard yourself? Fowles wanted to say. Strange noises and doors shutting! If it got any more cliched, there'd be reports of something in a white sheet having scared the knickers off the under–maid. But for the sake of superficial harmony within the group – and his fee – he confined himself to a more–or–less polite enquiry.

'And no–one has tried to live here since the Atwells left?'

'I never said that. After the Atwells did a runner, the house was put on the market. Several families came to view it, but not one of them made an offer. Apparently some people got bad vibes. One woman fainted as she crossed the threshold and even needed counselling for a time. Then, about three years ago, an estate agent died when he was doing an inspection here on his own. He was found in one of the upstairs rooms. No indication of foul play, but the quacks couldn't agree on a cause of death. He was twenty–five years old and a fanatical marathon runner. That seemed to have been the last straw for Brandon Atwell. He took the place off the market and wrote it down as a tax loss or whatever rich people do ...'

'When they own a haunted house,' Fowles intervened.

He was pleased by their response. Sadie giggled sexily and even the parapsychologist broke into a smile. Veronica, the medium, touched his arm in an almost coquettish way.

'I hadn't realised you were so witty, James. I must read one of your books.'

The parapsychologist was still smiling, having obviously thought of his own amusing remark. 'I've read several of them. They're not bad.' He looked significantly at Fowles. 'Given that the clue is in the word fiction.'

The writer, who was warming to all his companions after his little success, smiled back. 'Touche.'

With Robin leading the way, they made a thorough inspection of the property, from the mouldering nakedness of what had presumably been its wine cellar to the cobweb–festooned attic. Klieg lights had been installed on the extensive first–floor landing, which gave access to several large and sour–smelling

bedrooms. One of these contained a double bed, the only piece of furniture in the house, its mattress patched with mildew but still serviceable. ‘That’s strange,’ the parapsychologist muttered.

‘The removal men must have been scared off before they got the chance to take it away,’ Fowles joked.To his consternation, more than one person nodded solemnly.

‘Spooky,’ Sadie said, with one of her delicate shivers.

If I had my own vehicle, Fowles thought, they could stuff their fee.

Robin clapped his hands. ‘Well, let’s get to it.’

He herded them into a cavernous ground–floor room, where a couple of technicians were huddled together in front of a row of screens. Frankie, the chief cameraman, evidently the veteran of a hundred such occasions, sauntered over and addressed Robin with a faintly subversive smile.

‘Ready to rumble, boss? Let’s hope the ghosties haven’t decided to take the night off this time.’

The party–pooping implication of his words heartened Fowles. It also prompted him to ask a question.

‘When was this place built?’

‘Thirty–three years ago. I know what you’re thinking, not long enough to become haunted. But if bad things have happened here ...’

‘What bad things?’

Robin, he was pleased to note, had begun to look a bit sheepish. ‘That’s the problem, we don’t have much of a back story, as I told you. We just have to take it on trust that something is going on here.’

‘I feel it,’ Veronica said firmly.

‘Me, too,’ the psychic artist concurred.

Any goodwill Fowles night have felt towards the others had long since evaporated. ‘Jesus,’ he muttered under his breath. He reached for his mobile phone.

‘Good, you’ve reminded me,’ Robin said. ‘All phones off, please. Now, this minute.’

Everyone settled themselves in the canvas director chairs that had been provided. Veronica had an extra–wide one, but it was still a tight squeeze.

Robin took a last look around. ‘Right, we have sensors in place and temperature tracking devices ready to do what they do best.’ He winked at a nervous–looking Sadie. ‘Which is to track.’

Then in an American accent: ‘Let’s roll, people!’

‘Lights out,’ the grizzled chief cameraman ordered.

Someone gasped as the glare of the monitors sent shadows writhing across the ceiling. Fowles had always understood the perturbing affect of the dark on susceptible minds – it was why the majority of his novels contained midnight confrontations in ancient graveyards or similarly bizarre locations. He was only giving his readers what they wanted, after all, vicarious encounters with the spine–chilling unknown. But his present companions craved the real thing. Gullible fools, he thought, though without great animosity. For a moment, he actually felt sorry for them and their doomed enterprise.

It wasn’t long before they deserted the relative comfort of their oasis of technology to make the first of several trawls through the pitch–black house, Frankie hefting his infrared camera and everyone else with a flashlight. Up and down the stairs they went, entering one room after another, finding nothing but dust and cobwebs. There were the usual creaks and groans of a building at night, and Fowles conceded the experience would have been mildly unsettling if they hadn’t been wandering around mob–handed. As it was, it felt little more stimulating than a ride on a ghost train with a bunch of schoolkids.

In spite of the lack of evidence, the medium and psychic artist continued to insist they could sense a presence. In the room with the bed, Veronica paced around, apparently sniffing the air. ‘There’s definitely been something here very recently,’ she pronounced in a theatrical undertone.

Sadie gave a little squeal.

Fowles had to hold back a laugh.

After yet another unproductive tour at two o’clock, they were settling down to coffee and sandwiches when a loud beep came from the bank of instruments.

‘The sensor in the cellar,’ one of the technicians called over his shoulder.

Robin jumped to his feet, sounding remarkably fresh for the time of night. ‘Let’s go, folks.’

The mass charge was led by the parapsychologist, who groaned in disappointment as their flashlights crisscrossed the dank emptiness of the underground chamber. Hoping for a repeat of the phenomenon, they stood very still for several minutes, digital recorders at the ready, everyone except Fowles holding their breath. Frankie continued to film.

Robin made a sudden gesture. ‘Did you hear that? A sort of bumping noise.’

‘Yes, I heard it,’ the parapsychologist replied, his boyish enthusiasm instantly returning. ‘I think it came from upstairs.’

A technician was waiting for them at the top of the cellar steps. ‘We’ve detected a cold spot in one of the bedrooms. Third on the right.’

It was the room with the bed.

Veronica shivered as soon as she walked through the door. ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ she muttered with an almost fierce passion.

‘Yes what?’ Fowles asked, as mildly he could manage in the circumstances.

‘It’s very close by,’ she whispered. ‘I feel it, too,’ Sandra responded, as if it was a contest to be the most clairvoyant.

After another fruitless wait, they trooped back downstairs.

There were several more alarms in the next couple of hours, with cold spots showing up in different parts of the house; and each one led to a mad stampede that was soon followed by a chorus of frustrated voices. They had left all the bedroom doors open, triggering interminable discussions about whether this or that door had closed by a fraction. The only remotely scary moment was when Sadie screamed as they went into the room with the bed for the third or fourth time. It turned out that a cobweb hanging from the door lintel had brushed her face.

By then, Fowles was sick and tired of the whole farcical situation. He decided to make his feelings clear. As they slumped back into their inadequate seats for the umpteenth time, with still no mention of going home, he suddenly stood up.

‘That’s it. I’m ready for bed.’

He was halfway across the room when the medium said, ‘You’re planning to go upstairs on your own, aren’t you?’ It was the first time he had been even faintly impressed by her psychic powers.

‘Got it in one.’

‘But you can’t do that,’ Robin protested.

The agile writer’s mind came into play. ‘Look, just think of it as my own personal experiment. You never know, one of us on our own might just get this elusive paranormal thingummyjig to reveal itself.’

He smiled to himself as Robin pounced on the idea. ‘There might be something in that, James, old chap. OK, you go ahead.’

As Fowles thudded up the staircase, followed by Frankie with his faithful camera to record the settling in, Veronica turned to Sandra with a shudder. ‘Rather him than me.’

SURPRISE

Frankie returned to report that the novelist had fallen asleep almost as soon as his head hit the stained mattress. ‘You have to give it to him,’ he said with admiration. ‘He’s a cool one alright.’

Veronica and Sandra snorted in tandem.

The house grew quiet after that, with no more alerts from sensors or tracking devices; even the normal complaints from its walls and floorboards seemed to grow less frequent. Conversation became muted, desultory, until it finally died away. They were shifting about in their cramped chairs in the semi–darkness, fighting a mostly losing battle to get comfortable, when there was a loud noise from above their heads. ‘Shit, that’s a door closing,’ Robin said, springing to his feet.

Everyone raced upstairs. All the bedrooms still had their doors wide open. Peeping into where Fowles was gently snoring, Veronica showed a strong reluctance to go any further, shaking her head until the jowls flew. Her voice carried a note of pleading exhaustion.

‘We ought to wake him.’

Robin, irritated because there’d hardly been a decent scare all night, snapped at her, ‘Leave him be. I’m beginning to think he’s the only smart one amongst us. Let’s give it another half hour and, if nothing has happened by then, we’ll pack up.’

Nothing happened.

Most of the equipment had already been stowed away in the van, and the technical people were discussing where to stop for breakfast, when someone remembered about Fowles.

‘Go and wake him,’ Robin commanded Sadie.

His young assistant’s nerves were shredded by lack of sleep; and she remembered Veronica’s warnings about a presence in the bedroom. But since Robin was in one of his foul morning–after moods, she decided not to argue. No–one volunteered to go with her.

When it came, her shriek was by far the biggest sensation of the whole event. Robin cursed the fact that Frankie’s camera wasn’t turning.

‘He’s dead! He’s dead!’

And so Fowles was. Stretched out in exactly the same position on the decaying bed. But no longer snoring.

‘Look at his face!’ Veronica said in wonder.

‘I see it,’ Sandra shuddered.

SURPRISE

Robin and Frankie were still discussing the outcome of the inquest a week later, during a planning session for their next broadcast. Needless to say, the medium and psychic artist had hit the headlines with their claims. But the coroner's jury had evidently regarded them as cranks. In fact, Fowles would have been proud of the sound commonsense of the eventual verdict. Not a mark on the dead man, no reason to suspect death by anything other than natural causes. And yet, as the coroner pointed out with no little puzzlement, they were dealing with someone who had been active and healthy, had even passed a medical checkup only months before.

Frankie's belief in the non–existence of supernatural forces had obviously taken a battering. 'Seriously weird,' he concluded.

Robin, whose annoyance about missing the big climax had been eased by their little show having been the talk of the tabloids for the best part of a week, cheerfully disagreed with his colleague.

'Just one of those things.'

Promised a bigger budget by their bosses, he only wanted to talk about the future.

'More bangs for the buck,' he enthused. 'We can dump some of those piddling special effects. Bleepers going off, for Christ's sake! Time to give the punters something bigger and better, perhaps even rig up a hologram. Seriously scare the shit out of Veronica!'

But Frankie still had his mind on Fowles.

'I seem to remember you saying it gave you a turn. Just like it did me, and everyone else.'

'What are you talking about, man?'

'His face,' Frankie said simply.

Suddenly Robin seemed keen to change the subject. 'It was nothing but a coincidence. Let's move on.'

But the older man refused to be shaken off.

'I dreamed about it last night. He had the exact same look of total surprise on his face. You know, like he'd seen something he never expected to see.'

He paused and stared at Robin. 'At least not in this world.'

With an expression on his own face that was much harder to read, Robin said, 'Yes, anyway, about that hologram ...'

MIRROR, MIRROR

Rebecca soon noticed that everyone else in the place, residents and care assistants alike, seemed to be avoiding the old man. It increased her feeling that something was not quite right, remembering back to the almost secretive way she'd been summoned to matron's office. The woman had told her, with a sort of guilty half smile, 'He's been assigned to you for the time being.'

Jemma, who jokingly referred to herself as a veteran, later said, 'They always give newbies the short straw.'

Rebecca also recalled that matron had concluded their interview with what sounded like a warning. 'Don't let him tell you any of his stories, mind. As soon as he starts, tell him to shut up.'

The intensity on her face had startled Rebecca. He's only an old man for God's sake, she wanted to say.

When she reported back to Jemma, her new friend had reinforced the message. 'Do as she says,' she cautioned. There was a look that could have been shame in her eyes, but she wouldn't say any more.

All very strange, thought Rebecca, not without a certain amount of relish. She was an imaginative girl, who enjoyed reading horror stories and crime thrillers and whodunits. The prospect of getting to the bottom of a mystery made her feel a lot better about her decision to choose the nursing home over their local supermarket as a place of work.

The old man's name was Fred and he was in his eighties. His wife had been dead for a couple of years and he was alone in the world. These few facts she learned from matron, since Fred never talked about himself. When questioned, he always retreated into silence. But he never showed any self–pity and was almost pathetically grateful for everything she did for him. He's a sweetie, Rebecca thought. Somehow it made the puzzle even more delicious.

Dr Rodell, with whom half the unattached care assistants were in love, called in most afternoons to deal with the medication needs of the old people. Helping him to dose a resident one day, Rebecca pointed to the old man, who was quietly dozing in a corner of the room. As usual, the chairs to either side of him were vacant.

'I can't understand why no–one likes Fred.'

'Yes, it's a shame.'

She could see he was wondering how to go on. 'It's just that, well, he seems to have an unfortunate affect on people.'

'What do you mean?' Rebecca asked, trying to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

When Dr Rodell glanced over to Fred, Rebecca was reminded of her biology teacher at school – the way he used to look when he was dissecting some creature he'd never come across before.

The handsome features took on the guarded expression with which she was becoming familiar. 'I've told matron ... well, never mind about that. Just make sure you do as she says.'

A jarring note in his normally pleasant voice. 'Do you hear me?'

Rebecca nodded dumbly but pulled a face at his back as he walked off. Another one who's trying to scare me, she thought. A cliche from one of her crime novels set off a giggle. But I don't scare easily.

What made their warnings seem even more absurd was that Fred hardly ever spoke. Much of the time he seemed to be living in some alternative to the real world, his eyes shifting around the room with a faraway reflectiveness. He never once attempted to tell her any sort of story, dangerous or otherwise. Most of their conversations were restricted to the bare minimum.

'Here's your dinner, Fred.'

'Thank you, love.'

In fact, she would have welcomed some chatter from him, because she was getting very little from anyone else. It was as if Fred's unpopularity had rubbed off on her. Apart from Jemma, none of her colleagues were in any way friendly. The residents were no better, Mrs Fellini positively flinching when Rebecca picked up her ball of wool from the floor and handed it back.

During a tea break, as they sat at a different table to everyone else, she asked Jemma point–blank, 'Do I smell or something?'

Jemma looked embarrassed. 'Don't mind them.'

Rebecca glared at the other carers. 'I don't.'

She voiced a thought that had been on her mind for days. 'Why do they keep him here, since everyone hates him? Couldn't he go to another home?'

'That's the problem, no–one else will have him. I think word must have got around.'

'There you go again, making out that pathetic old man is a menace or something! What word are you talking about?'

Jemma's frown said she had already gone too far. 'Please, Becky, just be patient. Someone else will join soon, then you won't be the newbie.' She stared at

Rebecca. ‘Or are you thinking of leaving anyway?’

That was indeed what Rebecca had been thinking; life behind a supermarket till had never seemed more inviting. But then she saw Fred through the open door of the living room, on his own as always, staring into space. He was visibly shaking and looked bewildered and very vulnerable. Rebecca wondered how he would feel if she abandoned him. How she would feel.

She encountered matron in the corridor that afternoon. The woman examined her intently. ‘Everything OK with Fred?’

Rebecca kept her face blank. ‘Why, of course. He’s good as gold.’

‘And you’ve done as I said?’

Rebecca couldn’t resist it. ‘What about, matron?’ she asked innocently.

‘Not listening to his stories, girl.’

‘Oh, that. To tell the truth, he hardly speaks at all.’

‘Good, good.’

Another piercing glance when they parted, as if matron was trying to read her thoughts. It made Rebecca wonder if her little act had rattled the older woman. There’d been something else in her eyes, though, a sort of perplexed enquiry. Dr Rodell had looked the same way at Fred.

Rebecca felt closer to the old man than ever. Seems like we’re two of a kind, she thought.

Specimens.

Weeks went by, and the old man continued to be taciturn and docile, responding to Rebecca’s helping hand with gratitude but very few words. By this time, she noticed, other people were beginning to relax around her. A couple of her fellow care assistants even had the grace to apologise for their previous behaviour. Still angry with them, Rebecca bit her lip and smiled.

When another girl joined the staff, Jemma rushed to Rebecca with the news. ‘You’re not the newbie any more!’

Rebecca immediately went to matron and asked to remain as Fred’s carer. She sensed the woman was relieved not to have to go through with the reassignment.

‘As you wish, Becky.’

There were more than a few puzzled stares in Rebecca’s direction in the weeks that followed. However, she had the feeling matron wasn’t the only one who welcomed not having to adjust to a new situation. Again she dug into her fund of American crime slang. They’ve got used to me being the fall guy.

Jemma was the only one who tried to get her to change her mind. ‘Isn’t it time you took a break from him?’

Rebecca laughed. ‘What are you talking about? He’s easier to look after than any of them.’

‘Yes, but you don’t know ...’

‘Don’t know what?’

The usual shutter came down. ‘I – I can’t say, Becky. I’d lose my job.’

As Rebecca walked off in exasperation, she had an inspiration. No use talking to the monkeys, she told herself, I have to go to the organ grinders. Funnily enough, for the first time in her life it felt as if she had real power. After all, it seemed as if they needed her more than she needed them. Her resolution was strengthened when the newbie made it clear she had been brought up to speed by the other carers, a look of alarm on her face every time Rebecca went anywhere near her. There was already talk of her resigning.

When she made an appointment to see matron, Rebecca asked for Dr Rodell to be present. Relishing her new–found authority, she got straight to the point. ‘I want to know what’s going on with Fred. I think I have the right.’

Matron started to splutter angrily, but fell silent when Dr Rodell held up a hand. ‘Yes, perhaps it’s time you knew, Becky.’ An opaque look on his clean–cut features. ‘There’s not much we can tell you, though.’

Rebecca got to her feet. ‘Fair enough. How many weeks notice is it?’

Dr Rodell motioned her to sit back down. ‘It’s not what you think. The problem is that we don’t know what’s going on ourselves.’

As the doctor gathered his thoughts, matron was staring woodenly at the floor.

‘To put it in simple terms, there have been strange things happening here. All of them to do with Fred.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘People have died.’

‘Only two people,’ matron interjected, raising her eyes to glare at Dr Rodell.

Only two people: Rebecca would have laughed if the others hadn’t looked so serious. Dr Rodell went on in a stronger voice.

‘You ought to know that Fred hasn’t been with us for long. When he first came, he used to sit beside the same old lady. One day he was overheard telling her a story, no–one knows the details, just something odd that had happened to him. She was too afraid to go to sleep that night. Died the following day, apparently of a

heart attack. The exact same thing happened with another of the residents a few weeks later.'

Rebecca was puzzled. 'But sick old people quite often die, don't they?'

'Yes, they do, so we put it down to coincidence. But then the carer assigned to him ...'

'Like me, you mean?'

'Like you. Well, she didn't turn up for work one day. A couple of the others remembered her looking scared out of her wits the previous afternoon. Someone else seemed to think it was after Fred told her a story about himself.'

He looked at Rebecca. 'We never saw her again, it was as if she had disappeared.'

'As you can imagine, we were beginning to wonder by this time. Anyway, matron assigned her most experienced carer to Fred after that. He was seen jabbering away to her one afternoon. Not long after ... well, not long after, she left us. Mentioned to people that she was seeing things before she went. Horrible things – she wouldn't say what. She refused to go anywhere near Fred. Seemed to be terrified of him.'

Rebecca stared back. 'What happened to her?'

Dr Rodell shook his head, unable to go on. Matron reluctantly stepped into the silence. 'She's in a psychiatric ward.'

'And you let me do this without saying a word?'

Dr Rodell tried not to look sheepish. 'We thought it would be best not to worry you.'

'Oh, that's alright then.' A thought struck her. 'How many newbies have there been? Looking after Fred?'

'You're the third. The others didn't stay long. I think they were scared off by the rumours floating around the place. After the last one left, matron warned all the assistants that the next person caught talking about what happened would be sacked on the spot.'

Matron spoke up, a note of brittle optimism in her voice. 'The fact is he's been really quiet for months now. You must have noticed. We think we might be over the worst.'

'The worst being that I'll die or end up in a nuthouse, I suppose?'

As the others lapsed into a shamefaced silence, Rebecca decided to get some of her own back.

'And what if he's not over the worst?' A phrase from the novel she was reading. 'What if he's a gun waiting to go off?'

There didn't seem much else to say after that. As she got up to leave, Dr Rodell still looked disturbed by her last remark. 'I'm really sorry, Becky. We should never have done it.'

Rebecca could tell matron was already thinking about how to manage Fred in the future. There was a brooding note in her voice. 'Of course, we'll give you a good reference.'

Later on, Rebecca wondered if she'd been attracted by the challenge of solving the mystery. Or by the fact that at last something exciting was happening in her uneventful life.Whatever the reason, she said, 'There's no need. I'll see you tomorrow.' Smiling with satisfaction as she saw their mouths drop open in surprise.

The next day she was cutting up Fred's food for him as he sat in isolation in his usual corner. As always, he'd been even less sparing with his words than matron was with her smiles. Rebecca, both concerned and exasperated, asked, 'Don't you ever say more than please and thank you, Fred?'

Expecting the customary silent treatment, she was startled by a sudden burst of words. 'I know I act like a senile old sod, love. But it's best I don't talk.' It was perhaps the most extensive speech she'd ever heard him make.

'Why is it best?'

But he was staring over her shoulder.

Rebeccca, without paying particular attention, had noticed it before, the way his eyes would suddenly stop roaming around the room and focus on what appeared to be nothing in particular, while his feeble body trembled before going taut for seconds at a time. She quickly glanced behind her, just in time to catch Dr Rodell looking away.

'Are they making you keep quiet?'

The old man looked ashamed. 'Please don't push it, love.'

He made a gesture to show he wanted to be left alone. She was conscious of Mrs Fellini and others watching her as she left the room. The newbie, obviously pleased about not having to look after the old man, smiled in gratitude in the corridor. Rebecca was too preoccupied to smile back, trying to damp down an insistent voice inside her.

Somehow I'll get to the bottom of this.

It was Christmas not long after and an afternoon carol concert was being held in the main sitting room. Every resident but one had friends or relatives visiting them.

Rebecca was holding onto the old man's hand, determined to make him feel

wanted, when she felt him convulse – once, twice, then a third time. He suppressed the tremors with a great effort, she could tell, his scraggy frame going unnaturally rigid. But he was unable to wipe the grimace off his face as he stared beyond her. Whirling around in exasperation, hoping to catch matron or the doctor in the act, she was surprised to find everyone else watching the choir.

Why do you stare like that? she wanted to ask Fred. As if you can see things that are invisible to other people. Things that really bother you. Then, without warning, a memory came to her. Matron talking about the carer who was in a psychiatric ward.

That the woman had been seeing things.

The thought made her feel like a fool – too much reading about ghouls and demons, that's your problem. At the same time an alarm bell sounded in her head. What if there *is* something seriously weird going on? But even as she was telling herself that she didn't fancy spending the rest of her life in a loony bin, she found it impossible to suppress a surge of curiosity and excitement.

Since Fred had said he wouldn't mind a drop or two of brandy, she had already sneaked something from the corner table that was laden with bottles of wine and spirits. The drink was intended for visitors, not staff or residents, but even matron couldn't keep her beady eyes on everyone.

Now, wanting to do rather than to think, Rebecca wandered over to the table. When everyone had their backs turned, she quickly poured brandy into Fred's cup, and some more into a tumbler. They surreptitiously toasted each other as the choir reached a thunderous climax.

Not a great one for alcohol of any kind, Rebecca spluttered as she downed the spirit in one go. She saw Fred looking at her in surprise. She smiled back sweetly, trying to think of the phrase for what she was doing. Yes, that was it.

Finding Dutch courage.

She stealthily paid a third visit to the drinks table before Fred said he was tired. As she struggled more than usual to get him up from his chair, Rebecca had a fit of the giggles. Fred joined in. As matron stared suspiciously in their direction, he muttered, 'Straight face, girl.'

Safely back in his room, they resumed their sniggering. The brandy was obviously relaxing Fred; it was the first time she had seen him laugh. There was noticeably less tension in his face, his whole body. He seemed ready to talk. It's now or never, she told herself.

She charged in before she changed her mind. 'What was your wife like, Fred?'

‘Oh, Mabel was a good old stick.’ He patted her hand awkwardly. ‘Just like you.’

‘How long were you and Mabel married?’

‘Fifty–four years. It was the worst thing that ever happened to me when she died.’

His bitterness, close to anger, startled Rebecca. But even a self–reprimand about stirring up painful memories couldn’t stop her from saying, ‘You must have loved her very much.’

He spat out the words. ‘I loved her, alright. Too much. Too bloody much.’

No mistaking the rage now. But the wasted features conveyed an even stronger emotion. Rebecca couldn’t make it out at first, but as he drew back his lips in a sort of whimpering snarl, the realisation overwhelmed her.

The old man wasn’t mourning the loss of his wife.

He was scared to death.

Rebecca felt as if she’d struck gold, improbable but enticing notions suddenly coursing with the alcohol around her veins. Had Fred murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy? Was he hiding in the home from someone seeking revenge? Perhaps her ghost was haunting him?

She reined in her imagination by telling herself to behave like a proper detective. ‘What do you mean by that, Fred?’

As the old man examined her with rheumy eyes, looking as drunk as she felt, Rebecca wondered if it would be wiser to get up and leave the room. Otherwise, she knew, she would see things through to the end. Don’t talk to him, matron had warned. At least two dead. One in a loony bin. She shivered. At the same time, she couldn’t push away thoughts of her boring life. She wasn’t clever or attractive to men, had many years of dull routine ahead of her.

She remained seated on the edge of his bed.

‘You don’t want to know, love. I can tell you that for sure.’

He made a tired gesture that she should leave the room. Shock tactics, Rebecca thought. The police use them all the time in interviews.

‘You see things, don’t you?’

The words could have come straight from one of her Stephen King novels. Totally mad. But the old man nodded, as if he had no more strength left to fight her.

Stifling a cautionary voice inside her, Rebecca took a deep breath and plunged in. ‘What do you see, Fred?’

But his eyes were already drooping. ‘G’night, love,’ he muttered weakly, pulling the bedclothes up to his chin.

Resigned to defeat, Rebecca stood up. She kept the bedside lamp on; it was one of the old man’s peculiarities that he never slept in the dark. Reaching for the door handle, she looked around one last time to make sure he was alright, and almost cried out loud when she saw him sitting bolt upright in bed, staring into an empty corner. He was a ghastly sight, not unlike some sort of demon himself, with wild tics under both eyes, a rictus for a mouth, his chest literally quivering with tension; every part of him, it seemed, barely under control. Even in the half light, she could read agony and anger on his face. As she gazed at him, stunned and afraid, he switched his burning gaze to her. ‘I see something alright. Get out before I tell you what, you silly bitch.’

His manic appearance, the malevolence in his voice, the brutality of his words, drove Rebecca from the room. As she fled along the corridor, she could hear him drunkenly shouting, ‘Go to hell, you bastard! Go to hell!’

He went rapidly downhill after that, refusing to eat most of the time, having to be practically dragged out of his bed in the mornings. About a week later, Rebecca overheard Dr Rodell talking to matron. She was angered by the unconcealed disappointment in his voice.

‘Apart from the usual effects of old age, I can find nothing wrong with him. There’s absolutely no medical reason to admit him to hospital.’

Needless to say, Rebecca was doing almost all the caring for the old man. Jemma loaned the occasional hand when Fred was being extra stubborn, but she could never seem to get out of his room quickly enough. Remembering back to Christmas, Rebecca was inclined not to blame her. But at the same time, racked by suspicions she had brought about the sudden decline, she felt more strongly than ever that she couldn’t just walk out on him.

‘It’s not going to be long now,’ matron told her, trying hard to appear sorry. ‘You remember what I said about not listening if he comes out with any of his tales?’

‘Yes, matron.’

It was towards the end of a night shift when she went into Fred’s room and saw at once that he had grown much weaker. His breathing was laboured, irregular. But he was awake and aware, his feverish eyes tracking her as she crossed the room. He gave a gargoyle leer that might have been an attempt at a smile.

‘Not long now, love,’ he said in an unsteady voice, sounding even more pleased about the prospect than matron.

‘Don’t say that,’ Rebecca said, as she plumped his pillows.

‘No, it’s for the best’. His obvious pain struck her to the heart. ‘Don’t know how I’ve stuck it this long, to tell the truth.’

A shiver of intuition ran through Rebecca. ‘Not like the others, you mean? The residents who died? The carer who disappeared? The one who went mad?’

The old man gaped at her, toothless and dismayed, then slumped back. As his eyes closed, Rebecca believed she could see the blankness of death on his face. Oh, you insensitive moron, she berated herself, you’ve done it now.

She was about to call for help when a feathery touch on her arm made her flinch. The old man was staring at her. ‘Please don’t,’ he said, his voice so low that she could barely catch the words. ‘Let me die in peace.’

Rebecca took his almost translucent hand. ‘OK, Fred.’

They fell silent. Rebecca knew the end was very near. In spite of herself, desperately tired after her long shift, she could feel herself nodding off – until she was jerked fully awake by a tremendous judder from the old man. He was watching something behind her, no longer even attempting to disguise his feelings, a look of sheer horror on his emaciated features. She could almost hear his bones rattle.

She turned around very slowly.

Nothing.

Her heart still thumping, she asked, ‘What is it you see, Fred?’

‘Oh, you don’t want to know, love.’

‘What about those others you told? The old ladies, the carers?’’

She was shocked by the sudden cruel pleasure on his face. ‘Never liked any of them.’

Then he died.

Rebecca thought she would be the only mourner at the ceremony in the crematorium. When she asked for the afternoon off, matron had made the barest attempt to hide her relief. ‘How nice of you, Becky. You can represent the home. We’ll pay for the flowers, of course.’

She knew at once that the middle–aged man who stood at the back of the small and draughty chapel was related to Fred. A considerably younger version, but with the same long nose and wide mouth, a similar slouch to the shoulders. After the priest made his excuses and rushed off to a less sparsely attended but equally conclusive ritual, the two mourners left the chapel together.

‘You knew my uncle?’ the man, obviously curious, asked.

Rebecca explained.

The man studied her face. ‘So you liked him?’

‘Very much.’

A gloomy silence followed. To keep the conversation going, Rebecca asked, ‘Have you come far?’

‘Yes, a fair way. Several hours on the motorway.’

Rebecca suppressed the uncharitable thought that it would have done more good to see his uncle while he was alive. She put on the nearest she could manage to a smile.

‘You must have been fond of him.’

‘Actually, I hated his guts.’

His words startled her. But it wasn’t until he swivelled his head urgently from side to side, as if he was looking out for someone – or something – that the shock really hit Rebecca. The same wary, watchful eyes, a similar strained expression; and she sensed his body could go into spasms of fear and defiance at any moment. It might have been Fred standing in front of her. She wondered when he would begin to stare over her shoulder. Focussing on what was invisible to her and everyone else.

She had the urge to walk off, but an almost irresistible temptation kept her rooted her to the spot.

Wondering if she had been brainwashed by the stuff she liked to read, every connection only in her head, she picked her words carefully. ‘Do you know what happened while Fred was in the home?’

The man took on the familiar guarded look. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

Oh, to hell with it, Rebecca thought. ‘People died. At least one person went mad. And it was all to do with your uncle.’

She had to help him to a nearby bench. In spite of feeling guilty, she struck before he had a chance to regain his composure.

‘You know what’s going on, don’t you?’

By now, deep creases in his forehead, his shoulders slumped, the man looked not much younger than his uncle. Unnerved by the resemblance, Rebecca had an even stronger urge to leave. A warning voice in her head. Better not to know. Before she could move, the man spoke. ‘Yes, I know. I wish to God I didn’t, but I do!’

Rebecca, her caring instincts at a low ebb, never thought to comfort him. Instead she was still debating whether to carry on. Another voice saying it was the most interesting thing that had ever happened to her. A third joining in: probably a load of rubbish anyway.

‘Going to tell me about it, then?’

The man seemed to take her in for the first time. ‘You’re a determined young lady, aren’t you? Given what you know, aren’t you afraid?’

Rebecca decided to be honest. ‘Yes, a bit.’

He shrugged. ‘Oh, I suppose it can’t do any harm.’ His vindictiveness made her wince. ‘Now the old sod’s dead. The curse, or whatever it was, was on him, after all.’

A pause for reflection. ‘To tell the truth, I’ve been dying to tell someone. Haven’t even told the wife. Scared, I suppose, that she’ll think I’m crackers. Have me committed. Then there’s the other thing ... I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.’

Shaking his head, apparently reluctant to continue. ‘No, not my worst enemy.’

Rebecca used her best you–have–to–eat voice. ‘You’re the same as your uncle, aren’t you? You see things.’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you see?’

‘I see me.’

To lighten her own mood as much as anything, she tried a joke. ‘I see me in the mirror every day.’

A single tear rolled down the man’s cheek.

Rebecca stumbled over her words. ‘I – I dont understand.’

The man made an obvious effort to pull himself together. ‘It happened after Mabel died. You knew about her?’

‘His wife.’

‘Yes, anyway, when she died my uncle went to pieces. They’d been together a long time.’

‘Fifty–four years.’

‘Yes. Anyway, he lived in the country in those days. There was a local woman who had a reputation for being able to communicate with the dead. Uncle went to her.’

Rebecca, back on surer ground, laughed. ‘My auntie did the same when my uncle Tom died. They had a seance to allow her to speak with his spirit or something. But nothing happened.’

The man looked at her grimly. ‘Something happened with my uncle alright.’

Rebecca stared back. ‘What?’

MIRROR, MIRROR

‘You have to understand this woman wasn’t just one of your ten–a–penny mediums. Even if they’re genuine, they can only bring back the sound of your loved one. This ... this woman went much further. Somehow she could get through to what she called the other side, conjure up whoever it was you wanted to see. Not just their voice, but *them*. As if they were still alive. Just for seconds perhaps, but enough to tell you that their spirit was living on somewhere. ’

He paused for reflection. ‘A few hundred years ago and she’d have been burned as a witch.’

‘So Fred saw Mabel again? What was so bad about that?’ Rebecca asked, puzzled.

He looked grimmer than ever. ‘Fred never got to see Mabel. He saw something, though. Something that wouldn’t go away.’

‘Wha – what did he see?’ Rebecca stuttered.

‘He saw himself.’

She thought back. ‘And you see yourself.’

‘That’s it in a nutshell.’

Taking in her bewilderment, he laughed; the bleakness of it grated on her nerves. But by then even the most innocent noises seemed threatening. She jumped when a bird began to sing in one of the leafless trees that lined the pathway through the crematorium.

The man was galloping on, obviously determined now to finish his story. ‘Seems the woman had made a mistake, got through to the wrong part of the other side. Brought back something that should have never been in this world. My uncle realised he couldn’t shake it off. That’s when he told me what had happened.’

The desolation in his flickering eyes made her wonder for a moment if he was simply a lunatic. She wanted to get up and run. ‘And that’s when he ruined my life.’

As if anticipating her flight, the man clutched her sleeve. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve heard of doppelgangers. I – I’ve been doing some research on the internet. Basically a doppelganger is the double of a living person that only he can see. In some cultures they’re thought to bring bad luck. In others they’re regarded as an omen of death. In any culture, they’re bad news.’

‘So you see something that looks like you?’

‘That *is* me, or at least a horribly distorted image of me. From another dimension.’

‘And you weren’t there when Fred first saw his dopp ... doppelganger?’

'No.'

'So how ...'

'The witch, or whatever she was, told us before she killed herself that Fred was some sort of conducter, accessing the other side in that perverted way without even realising it. So just by telling people the story, he could get them to see their doppelgangers.'

Rebecca stared in sick fascination. 'The woman killed herself?'

The man was so matter–of–fact he could have been explaining how a simple mechanism worked. 'Everyone dies of shock or commits suicide or goes mad, you know.'

Rebecca saw a flaw in his argument. 'But they say Fred died of natural causes. And you're still alive.' She tried to sound more confident than she felt. 'And neither are you mad.'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence,' the man laughed. 'No, it seems uncle had a high tolerance level for this sort of thing. A stubborn old bugger.' Another laugh, much shakier. 'Same as me. Must run in the family.'

The blood was pounding through Rebecca's head with such force that she could barely hear her own voice. 'Do you see it all the time?'

'No, it comes and goes. That's almost the worst part, waiting for it to appear. My own face scowling at me, looking more evil than anything you can possibly think of. As if the bastard can't wait for me to die.'

When did you last see it?'

The man's stare brushed past her, before settling on a patch of grass. 'Oh, it's been watching me for the last five minutes.'

And that was when Rebecca fled for her life, not once looking back, not stopping until she reached her car.

Driving along, she decided she would never return to the nursing home. Working in a supermarket had to be a lot less scary. She would get away altogether once she had enough money saved for the round–the–world trip she had always dreamed about. She also decided not to read any more horror.

As she approached the house where she lived with her parents, fragments of the nephew's story kept returning, playing over and over in her mind. The wrong part of the other side. Some sort of conductor. High tolerance level. Must run in the family.

It was late on a winter's afternoon and the light had largely gone when she pulled into their drive. She hesitated before getting out of the car, and told herself it

was only natural her nerves should be shot to pieces. At the same time, she couldn't help wondering if one of the shadows between her and the front door was somehow deeper than the rest. She pictured her own face glaring out of the murk at her.

Stupid, she thought, just my stupid imagination working overtime as usual.

But what if? she couldn't prevent herself from continuing.

What if something else runs in the family? Just by telling the story, the man had said.

What if ...

TREAT

The only thing the children had in common was they'd all disappeared on Christmas Eve. One each year for the past five years, Ferguson reminded himself, gazing at the familiar poster with its innocent faces on his way out of the station. It made him feel a bit ashamed about the excitement being shown by his own two, now the big day was almost upon them.

But it also made him want to be at home with them, protecting them. Though none of the children had come from their own small town, there was always a first time.

Their force, along with all the others in the region, was on high alert. Not that there was a single thing to go on. None of the youngsters had ever been seen again; no bodies and no clues. But at least it was late afternoon and there hadn't been word of another disappearance.

In need of cheering up, he was pleased Mr Margoyles's surreal little shop was on his beat. The old–fashioned bell tinkled over the door as he made his entrance. There were, as always, people taking in the sights but buying very little. Not that Mr Margoyles seemed to mind.

'I don't need the money,' he'd once told Ferguson. 'It gets me out of the house more than anything.'

His stock mostly consisted of musty knick–knacks bought at auctions around the country – flying ducks and Toby jugs and brass ashtrays, items that had gone out of style and weren't even of interest to collectors.

For that reason, the place had very few visitors at any other time of the year. Not in December, though. Looking around him now, Ferguson could see why. It was the usual over–the–top but strangely endearing display. A multitude of tinsel baubles glittered from the ceiling, while two massive Christmas trees sparkled and glowed in opposite corners of the room. Several smaller trees were arrayed on a shelf, each with a cloth fairy on top. Effigies of snowmen and reindeer stood everywhere.

Mr Margoyles had the look of a man who ate frequently and well. With the addition of a beard and red robe, he could have gone on display himself, as a more than credible Santa. Seeing Ferguson, he rushed over. 'Ah, welcome, constable! Your customary treat awaits you.'

A cloth with a holly and mistletoe motif was draped over the table in the back room. On it were plates stacked with sandwiches and mince pies. Mr Margoyles gestured. 'All freshly made. Please help yourself.'

He beamed with satisfaction when Ferguson picked up a doorstop stuffed with beef. 'Ah, still not a vegetarian, I see!'

TREAT

Wouldn't be Christmas without this, Ferguson thought, as he chewed on the beautifully cooked meat.At that moment, his radio spluttered into life. It was the desk sergeant, a friend of his. 'There's been another one,' he said, before naming a town twenty miles to the east of them. No further explanation was necessary.

'Christ, it's happened later than usual this time,' Ferguson breathed.

'There was a mixup between the little un's mum and nan,' the sergeant explained. 'Neither of them realised she was missing. We reckon she was taken this morning. Five, six hours ago.'

'My God,' Ferguson muttered.

Mr Margoyles was staring at him curiously.

'Is everything alright, constable?'

'Sorry, Mr Margoyles, but I have to go.'

He hurried out of the shop with a sideways glance at the little trees on their shelf. Something different about them, he felt sure, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

'Merry Christmas!' Mr Margoyles bellowed from behind him.

He was rushing back to the station when a further call came from the sergeant. 'We don't need you here, Mark. Carry on with your beat.'

Another missing child! Ferguson wanted to shout. Slowing down, he tried to gather himself into the semblance of a functioning policeman.

He was on the return leg of his circular route before he felt sure he was thinking straight again. One puzzler of a thought in particular kept nagging away at him. Probably just the drink, he told himself. Still shaken by the news, he had accepted a stiff glass of whisky from Mr Norton, the local butcher.

A conundrum, a poser. To do with something he'd seen on his beat that day. What was it?

Seeing Mr Margoyles's place a second time reminded him. Christmas trees, a mystery involving Christmas trees. The plump figure was visible through the tinsel draped window, bustling around as if preparing to shut up shop. Feeling foolish and a bit whoozy, Ferguson was tempted to carry on walking.

I must be mad, he told himself. It's the copper in me being unreasonably suspicious of everything and everyone. Rapidly, before he could change his mind, he made a jingling entrance.

'Constable,' Mr Margoyles greeted him. 'Twice in one day. I'm honoured!'

'Thought I'd pop in again for a minute,' Ferguson said, smiling with false sincerity. 'This is an oasis of light and colour in a mad world!'

The older man look at him askance. ‘You’re a terrible actor, constable. I know why you’re here.’

Ferguson was thinking he ought to withdraw his request to become a detective when Mr Margoyles boomed with laughter.

‘You’ve really returned for another of my beef sandwiches!’

Munching away in the back room, it came to Ferguson that he knew very little about Mr Margoyles. He had a feeling most people only knew the man as an avuncular presence behind the counter of his strange little shop.

‘How long have you lived around here?’ he asked

‘Oh, a long time,’ the other replied, sounding somewhat evasive. From previous experience, Ferguson knew he didn’t like talking about himself. Not to him, anyway.

He persisted. ‘But you haven’t always had this display at Christmas, have you? When did you start it?’

‘A few years ago now, I can’t remember. Come, please help yourself to something else. Mince pie?’

Ferguson, still worried about chasing shadows, felt reassured by what sounded like an evasive tactic. Was his unlikely line of enquiry actually on the right track?

He glanced towards the outer room. ‘There haven’t always been five trees, have there?

‘Trees?’

‘The ones with the fairies on top.’

‘I don’t understand.’

The shopkeeper’s eyes suddenly seemed out of place in the jolly red face. Something watchful and even calculating about them, Ferguson decided. Further reassured that he hadn’t gone crazy, he walked into the shop and pointed to the shelf with the Christmas trees.

‘I’m sure there were only four last year,’ he said, feeling like a poker player going for broke with very little in his hand. ‘And weren’t there three the year before that?’

Mr Margoyles stood in the doorway, peering at him. For once in his life, he appeared to be lost for words. Ferguson spent the silence studying the trees; it was the first time he had ever paid them any real attention. The cloth fairies looked hand–made, all of them different, and one of the irregularities struck him as strange. What was it?

Then the answer came.

TREAT

He hadn't needed his parting stare at the poster that morning to refresh his memory. He knew every detail of the missing children: the shape of their heads; the colour of their eyes; the colour of their hair. Three blondes, one chestnut and one close to black.

The same as the fairies.

His voice turned steely. 'You've been playing a little game with us, haven't you, Mr Margoyles?'

He turned and faced the older man, who was no longer smiling. The cunning had gone from his eyes, replaced by what looked suspiciously like an acceptance of guilt. Seeing this, Ferguson pressed home his attack.

'Stupid bloody coppers. Can't see what's in front of them. Must have kept you chuckling, eh?'

To his amazement, Mr Margoyles gave one of his booming laughs. 'Every game has to come to an end. Well done, constable.'

It was praise that echoed through the station after they did a search of Mr Margoyles's home and discovered clothes belonging to the missing children, plus other finds that turned the stomach of even the strongest officer. Bones everywhere. Blubber in fridges. A small head in a bucket under the sink.

Ferguson, given time off as a reward for his outstanding contribution to the arrest, was at home when the desk sergeant dropped by.

'He's totally round the bend, of course,' he said. 'Says it was just another Christmas tradition as far as he was concerned.'

Ferguson could see his friend was embarrassed, struggling to get out his next words.

'What is it, Jeff?'

'The powers that be thought I ought to tell you, Mark. Since we're mates and all. But, don't worry, they've got help lined up for you. Counsellors and things.'

'Christ, now you're beginning to worry me. What is it? Come on, man!'

The sergeant hesitated. 'Well, it's like this, Mark. Turns out he cooked bits of those children.' Another pause. 'Said they tasted like beef ...'

TRIUMPH

My brother Alex was different from me in almost every way. He was tall and fair–haired to my short and dark. He had spent time in Iraq and Afghanistan and I was Miss Stay–at–home. He liked risk and even danger. I liked chocolates and a good book. He was yang to my yin. We made good business partners.

We were each recovering from a personal trauma when we started up the shop, but even that only served to highlight the dissimilarities between us. Alex had been invalided out of the army after shattering his leg in a collision between armoured personnel carriers. Meantime, I was struggling to get over a failed relationship.

Some of his army pals must have thought it was hilarious, big bold Alex selling trinkets to the female population of Nottingham. But, in fact, he made a natural front–of–house man, well able to woo the punters with his easy charm. Meantime I was mostly in the backroom, making sure that everything else about our little operation was running smoothly.

Even a limp hadn't impacted on Alex's attractiveness to the opposite sex. 'Some of the silly bitches think it's romantic,' he said, softening the words with a wicked grin. He never discussed his sexual adventures with me – in fact, I hardly ever met any of his women – but I got the impression he was more than a bit of a heartbreaker. I overheard him ditch one girl quite casually over the phone.

That sort of thing only strengthened my resolve to stay away from men.

A pity the same couldn't be said for some of our customers. One middle–aged matron, who really should have known better, even offered to take my brother on a round–the–world holiday, with all expenses paid and lots of other extras. He told me he was tempted for about thirty seconds.

'Then I took a good look at her.'

As you may have guessed, sensitivity was not his strong point. I have always been the complete opposite, terrified of upsetting anyone's feelings. So far, so yin and yang. I was the boring and wishy–washy one, my brother, well, he was Alex.

In one respect only were our positions on the equilibrium reversed, with me being the light and him the dark. You might have expected blunt, tough, flirtatious Alex to be as open as a window on a hot day. I, on the other hand, should have been introverted and absurdly reluctant to talk about myself. In fact, I am a blabbermouth, always have been. If anyone was prepared to listen, I would tell them my life story in one sitting (one sitting would be enough).

For all his banter and bluffness, however, Alex had always played the really important cards close to his chest. The first time anyone in the family knew he was planning to join the army, for instance, had been when he suddenly turned up at the

house in full uniform. I knew him better than anyone, but found it impossible to read him sometimes; he actually seemed to *enjoy* keeping a secret! If he wasn't such a gregarious bruiser, I might even have called him deep.

Instead I was the one who had the occasional intuitive thought, the odd bout of what can only be referred to as second sight. One example is the time I surprised my friend Sara by telling her she was pregnant. And again when I begged Alex to get a taxi home following a stag do with some of his army pals.

'It's just this feeling that something bad is going to happen if you don't,' I remember telling him.

After he was attacked on the last bus by a drunk with a broken bottle – his assailant coming off much the worst – he laughed the whole thing off as a coincidence, and then accused me of being over–sensitive.

'You were always seeing bogeymen as a kid,' he teased.

His damning assessment of my precognitive powers wasn't shared by everyone; and a few people even said they were impressed by my forecasts. Most of my friends, however, seemed to think they stemmed more from luck than judgement.

'That was a good guess,' Sara told me after getting herself checked out.

As I said, Alex and I made a good team. With our little retail business starting to take off, I was so busy with a hundred and one things that it took me a while to notice that all was not well in my brother's private world. As easy to break into a safe with a tin–opener, however, as to get Alex to open up. But just as impossible to stop myself from trying.

'Another long face, babe? What's up?'

'Do you know how many times you've asked me that in the past week?' A glare that must have terrified the squaddies in his company. 'I told you. Nothing.'

I didn't believe him. Since we shared the accommodation above the shop to save money, I knew he hadn't been out with a woman for almost a month. In Alex terms that was the equivalent of the Pope not praying for a year or two. I was almost bursting with curiosity after he stayed in four nights on the trot. But it was when he sat down with me to watch one of my soppy DVDs that I really began to worry.

The idea of my macho brother attempting to get in touch with his feminine side seemed too bizarre for words. Yet one thought led to another – and then the answer came to me without much need for female or any other kind of intuition. I recalled all the previous times that Alex had looked so badly out of sorts. A common denominator had been the X factor.

TRIUMPH

The problem was a woman.

This suspicion edged into near–certainty after I saw the girl emerge from our shop as I returned from a quick dash to the bank one afternoon. Though she looked right through me, I certainly noticed her. It wasn't so much her prettiness that drew my attention – blonde and petite, she was exactly Alex's type – but more a case of something troubled about her face. I also got the impression of extreme single–mindedness.

Inside, my brother was on his own. 'Who was that?' I asked, keeping my voice light.

Alex stared at me. 'Don't know what you mean.'

Since he was looking as disturbed as the young woman, I didn't press him. His business. But it seemed to confirm my hypothesis that his recent moroseness was connected to a love affair. Unable to make up my mind as to who had done the dumping, I was trying to penetrate Alex's sullen mask for a sign when one of my premonitions sprang from nowhere.

I was going to see the girl again.

It happened about a week later, as I was returning from a lunch break. This time the tenseness of her expression almost drove me to say something. The girl finally seemed to take me in, and when our eyes met I suddenly realised that anger was her predominant emotion. I had no idea why, but it scared me. The young woman was walking away as I rushed into the shop.

I found Alex in our stockroom, lying on the floor, clutching the ankle of his sound leg.

'Oh, babe, what has she done to you?'

Alex looked so confused that it made me wonder for a moment if he'd also banged his head. Finally he managed to get out, 'Stop fussing. It's nothing. I fell off, that's all.' He pointed to the stepladder we used to get items off the top shelf.

Of course, he completely ignored my advice to stay in bed for a day or two to recover, and was soon doing a double limp around the shop. With the further restriction on his mobility, he naturally wasn't able to do too much climbing, but even after his ankle had recovered he continued to ask me to get things from the storeroom.

My brother losing his bottle after falling from four or five feet! It seemed like an absurd idea. But I could see that something was making him edgy. For a time, he became even more withdrawn.

He had too many drinking buddies to remain a trappist monk, however, and

he was eventually induced to go out on a drinking rampage. I decided to wait up for him.

'Not in bed?' he slurred, seeing me in my dressing gown as he practically fell through the front door.

Satisfied that he was boozed up to the eyeballs, I put my cunning plan into action.

'Nice night?'

'OK.'

It wasn't a good start, but I persevered. 'Meet any nice girls?'

'No.'

So much for alcohol loosening his tongue, I thought, but somehow found the nerve to try a more direct approach. 'Gone off women, have you? When was the last time you went out with someone?'

'None of your business.'

The anger in his voice put an immediate halt to any further enquiries. But it couldn't banish one unspoken question from my head. What has she done to you, babe?

I seized the chance for some enlightenment when a pal of his, Jake, dropped by the shop one afternoon and we got to talking while Alex was busy with a customer.

'He's caning it, your brother. Even by his standards.'

I hardly needed telling, having been woken three nights on the trot by Alex stumbling into the flat in the early hours.

'Does he talk to you?' I asked, with a quick glance at my brother. 'You know, about any problems he might have?'

Jake laughed. 'As much as he ever did,' he said.

I couldn't resist it.

'I can't help noticing that he seems to have gone off women. Any particular reason for that?'

For a moment, Jake looked as puzzled as I felt. 'Now you come to mention it.' Then he laughed again. 'Must be the time of the month.'

When Alex came over, they began to make arrangements for the night's entertainment; and that was when Jake must have repeated his joke. Without even turning around, I knew that my brother was watching me.

Perhaps it made him realise how worried I was, because he seemed to make an effort to be nice to me after that. The trouble was that almost everything he said only made matters worse, starting off when he casually mentioned that he planned

to abseil from an office block at a charity event. A week later, he signed up to do a parachute jump. But it was only after I had to persuade him that joining a base jumping club was not a good idea for a man with one decent leg that I decided to give in to my blabbermouth. Alex might have been good at keeping his worries to himself, but that was never my style.

In spite of my reputation as a born–again virgin, I still have some men friends. One of these, Martin, is a practicing psychologist. When I told him about Alex's plans and my anxieties, he looked thoughtful.

'And you say that he's gone from being a bit nervous to doing all these risky things? Sort of escalating the danger? Sounds like over–compensation to me.'

'Over–compensation?'

'It's a Freudian defence mechanism. The sort of thing that happens when someone attempts to offset what they perceive as a weakness in themselves by going to extremes in some other respect. Even to taking unnecessary risks.'

I was tempted to joke that, in that case, my brother must have been over–compensating for most of his adult life. But then I remembered the uncertain look in his eyes after the accident with the stepladder. Could it be the same uncertainty that he was now trying to overcome in his action man way? I grew more and more convinced that the girl was to blame for his recent behaviour.

Which made me very angry when I saw her among the people waiting for Alex to make his sponsored parachute jump. Normally I run a mile from confrontations, even verbal ones, but now I practically fought my way through the crowd to get at her. I was within a few yards when the oohs and ahs told me that something was happening. Everyone was looking upward, and I heard a man shout, 'He's going too fast!'

I wasn't the only one screaming when Alex hit the ground. But I'm sure I was the loudest. As I pushed forward to get to him, some instinct told me to look at the girl. It was just then that one of the people gathered around my brother yelled out, 'He's alive!'

It made me feel sick to see her expression at that moment. No other word for it but disappointment. Gut–wrenching disappointment, swiftly followed by a scowl that turned her face ugly. I changed my mind in an instant. I had been sure she'd damaged my brother, probably by dumping him, but now the opposite idea came rushing out of the blackness.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

The girl caught my eye at that moment. She grimaced, almost as if to acknowledge me, and then walked away.

TRIUMPH

Alex was lucky. He must have broken just about every bone in his body, but the doctors said he would live. When I first saw him in hospital, I was reminded of an old film I'd seen about the Invisible Man. By my third or fourth visit, we were able to hold a rudimentary conversation. In spite of his condition, I found it almost impossible to hold myself back. The questions were practically fighting each other to get out. One in particular. OK, he'd finished with her, but why did the girl loathe him with such a raging intensity?

I had no choice but to start off with a little white lie. 'I know all about her,' I said. 'The girl.'

His eyes and mouth were the only visible parts of his face. While I struggled to keep the guilty flush off my own features, the former surveyed me for a long moment. Then the latter began to speak in something nearer to a croak than a voice.

'You know?'

In for a penny, I decided. 'Yes.'

'Impossible.'

Nothing for it but to press on. 'I *know*.'

A damp patch at the corner of one eye; and to say I was gobsmacked would be an understatement. I had never seen my brother cry before.

His croak was getting so weak that I had to strain to catch his words. 'I didn't know she would do something that stupid.'

At last! I was so eager to get the story out of him that I leaned forward until our faces were only inches apart. 'What did she do to you, Alex?' I coaxed. 'Did she push you off that ladder?'

The bandages couldn't hide his bewilderment. 'Ladder?'

At that moment, a nurse rushed towards us. 'I'm afraid you have to go. I think you're upsetting him.'

It wasn't exactly a banning order, but they said I should stay away from the hospital for a couple of days.

That evening, I had a visitor of my own. It was Alex's pal Jake dropping by to see how he was. I'm ashamed to say that I soon strayed away from my brother's medical bulletin.

'Change in him? Oh, yeah, you mentioned. Well, I think it all started after he dumped this bird about two or three months back. He saw her every night for a bit. But you know Alex.'

'Did you ever meet her? What was her name?'

‘Shelley, I think. No, they weren’t going out very long. And he never talked much about her.’ We exchanged looks that said it all. Jake said it anyway. ‘You know Alex.’

‘And she was his last girlfriend?’

‘Pretty sure.’

And that was the best I was going to get out of Jake. But at least it gave me some ammunition for my next attempt on Alex. I again cursed the fact we were not more alike. When I first met my ex–boyfriend – the slug as I now think of him – everyone in my circle had learned his collar size, and just about every other size, almost before our second date.

Alex seemed to be much more his old self the next time I saw him, winking at the attractive young nurse who was adjusting his drip. He even sounded stronger.

‘Fancy going out with someone with multiple fractures?’

I had vowed to be tactful, I really had, but Alex almost immediately gave me my starter for ten. It was as if he only remembered the end of our previous conversation. ‘What was that about a ladder?’

‘I know about Shelley.’

The shock in his blue eyes forced me to say, ‘Jake told me.’

‘But what about the ladder?’

‘Did she push you off?’

‘Who?’

‘Shelley, of course.’

‘Jesus, Maddie.’ He seemed to be yelling as loud as his poor voice could manage. ‘Are you crazy?’

I tried to calm him before I once more got my marching orders from the hospital staff. ‘It’s OK, babe,’ I soothed. ‘It’s just that I saw her that day you hurt your ankle. Coming out of the shop.’

He was back to a croak. ‘You couldn’t have.’

It was one of the few traits we shared that I could be as stubborn as him when I wanted. ‘She’s small and blonde, beauty spot on the cheek, thing about pink lipstick, right?’

The colour seemed to drain away from around his eyes, until the skin was almost as white as the surrounding bandage. I didn’t need to see any other part of his face to know that my brother was afraid. Then the message struck home: he was afraid of *me*!

TRIUMPH

When he finally spoke, it was as if the words were being dragged from deep inside him. ‘This is total madness. She killed herself after I gave her the elbow. That was over a month before you say you saw her.’

Silence. Even my blabbermouth too stunned to speak.

Alex was the first to come back to life, no–nonsense again. ‘It’s OK, Maddie. I’m as crackers as you.’ Staring defiantly into my face, daring me to laugh.

‘That day, you know, it felt like there was someone in the stockroom with me. Not the first time either. I was twisting around to look when I fell off the ladder. No–one there, of course.’

Ghosts. I’d worried about them as a kid – needing a night light for a time – but I doubted if either of us had given the supernatural much thought since our early teens, my brother being too practical and me too nervous to contemplate the unknown. Since I certainly wasn’t going to laugh, there didn’t appear to be a lot else to say. Shortly after, Alex drifted off. I wondered what his dreams would be like. I wondered if I would be able to sleep at all.

I was still lost in thought when I left the hospital. It didn’t seem right somehow that I had been the one to see the ghost and not him. But, then, sensitivity had never been Alex’s strong point. Me, on the other hand ... I recalled the time an image of our Uncle Richard had flashed into my head, together with the premonition that something terrible was about to happen, only hours before the plane carrying him on a business trip crashed into the Atlantic.

Blame my state of shock for the fact that my psychic radar never saw it coming this time.

Because not long after I got home, the hospital phoned to say that Alex had somehow managed to get out of bed and throw himself from the roof of the building.

The doctor sounded troubled, as if he too had seen something that he couldn’t explain in any rational way. ‘How on earth he did it I absolutely cannot imagine. Almost like it was magic.’

Almost like magic.

I was so immersed in sorrow as I hurried towards the hospital entrance that I didn’t see her at first. She was looking up, I’m sure, at what had been my brother’s room. I could tell immediately that she was no longer angry. As I approached, she turned and stared at me and I saw the triumph in her eyes.

Then she walked away.

LIVING IN THE PAST

Gareth Scruggs liked looking back. So long as it was to any time Before Anna.

They'd been like strangers for years. She had a vicious tongue on her – and worse – when she was riled. Since it didn't take a lot to rile her, he tended to retreat to his separate bedroom as soon as possible after dinner, where he did his reading, marking up, watched some telly.

He also thought a lot about the past.

Gareth knew he was not a ground–breaker. There was a whole line of people − with Anna fighting her way to the front − who would have called him a stick–in–the–mud. It went with spending too much time in days gone by, he supposed, the fact that he wasn't much good with the future or even the present.

Anna blamed his inertia and dreaminess on his job. Gareth was a teacher. History, of course.

'Thinking about dead people all the time,' she'd sniffed once. 'Can't be healthy!'

She had never been academic: it was one of several hundred differences between them.

How did the joke go? Yes, my wife and I were happy for thirty–five years ... and then we got married. Anna must have had similar worries about being on her own into middle age. It was their only excuse for chaining themselves together. Nowadays, Gareth told himself, I'd be happier on a curtain rail, let alone the shelf.

At least the past remained a comfort to him – and in particular the late nineteen–seventies. Stephanie had been his first serious girlfriend, not to mention his first and only love. It made him sad and at the same time warm just thinking about her.

On the day that changed his life, however, even Stephanie would have found it hard to lighten his mood. He wanted to complain about things over breakfast, but Anna would only have sneered. Instead, as he read his newspaper, he muttered under his breath, 'This obsession with the new.'

Gareth knew what he liked and what he didn't like. He didn't like computers. Google this, Yahoo that. The names said it all. He liked to do his research the old–fashioned way, sitting in a nice warm library.

But their new headmaster, intending to turn the school into a hotbed of technology, had ordered the teaching staff to use computers for all their work. Having been prodded to the requisite level of white heat – along with several other fuddie–duddies – Gareth was about to collect his official laptop.

LIVING IN THE PAST

Back in his bedroom that evening, opening up the machine for the first time, it felt vaguely like a betrayal of his principles. And indeed the first few sessions seemed to confirm his worst fears, as he struggled through his training notes. But then, to his surprise, the sense of being a traitor wore off. A couple of weeks later, as he and Anna ate their dinner in a morose silence, he realised that he was actually looking forward to opening up the silver box on his bedside table.

Because by then Gareth had discovered a use for the internet that lay well outside the confines of scholarly research and the school curriculum. Something in the *Sunday Times* had got him started, a feature about websites that were helping to reunite old friends. He browsed casually at first, typing in names and other details and waiting to see what came up. Most often it was a big fat zero.

But he persevered, and then began to concentrate on one person in particular. Stephanie Piltdown. He hoped it would help that she had a relatively unusual surname.

After poking around various social networking sites without any success, he began to Google her name and brought up some interesting material on historical hoaxes. No trace of Stephanie, however, as the feeling grew that he was wasting his time.

Even Anna had begun to notice that something was wrong. 'You look terrible,' she said over breakfast, sniffing in disapproval. 'Too much reading, that's your problem. Not enough sleep'

It was the correct conclusion but wrong diagnosis. In fact, Gareth was being troubled by a recurring bad dream: a nightmare of walking through a dark and cavernous house, constantly calling out Stephanie's name. One empty room after another, and all the time panic rising in his gut until it jerked him awake. Three or four times every night.

He told himself, no more, as he browsed the web that evening. And suddenly there it was, the hyperlink to a site that contained the name Stephanie Piltdown.

The first words on the home page prickled his spine.

'*Absence diminishes small loves and increases great ones, as the wind blows out the candle and fans the bonfire – François Duc de La Rochefoucauld.'*

She's still beautiful, he thought, as he gazed at the picture of a serious–looking middle–aged woman. A whole series of emotions swept through him: immense relief, followed by pleasure that she was clearly sophisticated and intelligent, and then the longing to see her again. Finally, the curious sensation that their minds had reached out to each other at exactly the same moment.

This feeling grew stronger as he read on. The rest of the site consisted of several poems and short stories, all of them evidently written by Stephanie, and all of which seemed to have romance as their theme. Some words caught his eye: *'I've loved but I hope I haven't lost.'* And then a question that sent a further shiver through him.

'Are you out there?'

'Yes, yes,' he murmured.

There were only a few details of her life. She lived in South London with her husband. Their marriage was childless. Snap, Gareth thought. Then a revelation that had him blinking in wonder. *'I've recently switched to teaching after working for many years in the financial services industry.'*

Even as kids, they'd had so much in common! If only he hadn't gone away to college. If only her parents hadn't taken her abroad.

If only.

He scanned the site again. Yes, there it was. An email address. How to play it, though, in his first communication with her for thirty years?

He decided to follow her example and supply the minimum of hard facts. Those could wait until after she replied. *If* she replied. It crossed his mind that she might not even remember him. The thought brought on another attack of the shivers.

Worried about sounding flippant but suppressing his schoolmaster instincts, he instantly regretted not being more formal after pressing down on the SEND button.

'I'm out here. It's been a long time. Gareth.'

Following his first good sleep in weeks, he succumbed to a bout of tuneless whistling as he read his paper in the morning. Inevitably, Anna added some disharmony of her own. 'What are *you* so happy about?'

He had to work hard to sound like his usual miserable self. 'Nothing.' She stared back at him with suspicion.

The boys at school, he could tell, were similarly mistrustful of his new–found cheerfulness. He checked his inbox almost as often as he smiled; before and after each lesson and several times during his lunch break. Nothing, nothing and nothing, until the first doubts began to crowd in on him.

Anna, no doubt still thinking about his outbreak of good humour, gave him one or two especially ferocious glares during their evening meal. But she was settling down to her favourite soap as he climbed the stairs. He opened up his laptop. And there it was, her first words sounding as if she had read his mind.

LIVING IN THE PAST

'I have never ever forgotten you.'

A potted synopsis of her life followed; and reading between the lines, it hadn't been a very happy one in recent years. Gareth got the distinct impression her husband was more than a bit of a bully. Snap and snap again, he thought, struggling to keep what felt like a strangely teenage notion out of his head. I want you to be miserable until I come galloping to save you.

Youthful ardour, in fact, kept threatening to break through as he typed his reply. But he played it safe. They were middle–aged and middle–class, mustn't rush things. No point in getting anyone's hopes up. He couldn't resist insinuations here and there, however, that everything was not well with his own marriage.

He got the impression she had picked up on his sub–text right away: *'It's spooky how much we have in common.*'

That was Gareth's thought exactly.

His resolve to be sensible soon broke – life was much too short. And so he referred back to their adolescent romance, their painful separation, and then spoke about his feeling of having wasted the best past of thirty years. He took the final step in a PS: *'I LOVE YOU.'* After waiting with a thumping heart for her answer, he jumped around like a young man when it came.

'Me too.'

But Anna was growing more and more suspicious, he could tell. 'Not surprising, I suppose,' he muttered as he stared into his shaving mirror. It was getting hard to keep the grin off his face.

When Stephanie eventually gave him her mobile number, she told him not to text or ring her except in an emergency. Her husband was possessive and jealous, she said. Worried, Gareth asked in his next email if things were OK. All sorts went on marriages, he knew, abuses of every kind. Look at him and Anna. She had said and done some terrible things. He still carried the scar from the plate she had thrown at him in one of her tempers.

Now, however, he was a white knight on a rescue mission. Armoured against the slashing tongue, ready even to conquer his fear of airborne crockery. Better still, he had found the nerve to fight back in his own dry way. What was the phrase? – yes, wind her up.

'You were clicking away at that bloody computer until all hours,' she accused him one morning.

'I hope I didn't keep you awake, dear.'

He hadn't used the epithet in years. Anna scowled in surprise. If looks could kill, he thought happily on his way to work.

His wife's puzzlement, in fact, was rising at a similar rate to his own high spirits. She was almost too shocked to speak when he sat down in the living room after dinner and asked if they could watch the History Channel. Needless to say, he lost the battle for the remote, but went upstairs softly humming.

It was only days later that he asked Stephanie if they could meet up. Dying to ring her right away, resisting temptation only with the sternest self–control, he was almost too nervous to open her reply. But one glance made him feel like Columbus stepping ashore in the Americas. A brave new world indeed!

'Yes, yes, yes. I'm going to leave him. When and where?'

A sudden chill went through him as he sent his reply: *'After I've told Anna.'*

He fell asleep still rehearsing his confession, and what followed was anything but a restful night. Every time he drifted off, the familiar basilisk face leering at him, shrieking out the one word: NO, NO, NO!!!

He tried telling himself that she too would welcome their release from each other, but a memory kept nagging away, the time he had suggested that, perhaps, they ought to think about going their separate ways. Anna had reacted as if shot through the heart, her face crumpling for a moment, before she came back to life with a verbal fusilade of her own. Then she'd reached for a dinner plate. Feeling an unusual mixture of pity and fear, Gareth had hurriedly dropped the subject.

He went to work cursing himself for a coward, Tonight, he vowed, but somehow the words never emerged. He scurried upstairs immediately after their evening meal, praying for some encouragement from Stephanie. Make me strong.

There was nothing but spam in his inbox.

Trying to read, he found that even AJP Taylor had lost his charms, and was about to type a plea for reassurance, something, anything, when there was a knock at the door. Gareth hurriedly folded the lid of his laptop.

Anna coming to his room was almost unheard of. Her voice sounding close to conciliatory seemed totally without precedent. 'I'm about to make tea. Would you like some?'

'Um, no thanks.'

'OK.'

Only one little word but it was enough to set the alarm bells ringing. Anna hadn't given her OK to anything he'd said for as long as he could remember. He woke from a nightmare about Lucrezia Borgia and poisoned drinks; and had the sensation of still being in a dream when Anna smiled at him across the breakfast table.

'There's something good on the History Channel tonight,' she said in a too–casual voice.

It was as if all her massive confusion had been shifted onto him. At least his pupils were glad to be back in the real world, he could tell, no longer having to worry about him smiling at them.

He sent Stephanie an email in his lunch break. '*I've told Anna. We're finished. Where and when?*'

He would leave a farewell note for her on the mantleshelf, no need to put either of them through the agonies of a screaming match. Especially him. Perhaps it would be even worse, Gareth shuddered, remembering her attack with a saucepan after he had done little more than criticise her scrambled eggs. He decided to pack quietly and do a flit in the early hours.

It was when Anna asked him to watch TV with her that he realised things were getting seriously weird. For the first time, he noticed signs of strain on her face. Even her voice sounded a little unsure as they struggled with small talk. Who's kidnapped my real wife? Gareth asked himself.

The next evening was even more surreal, Anna sitting through a programme about the Kennedy assassinations with only the slightest pursing of her lips. As Gareth went upstairs after exchanging an awkward good night, the strangest idea came to him. Had Anna been on the point of asking him back into her bed? He pulled a face, trying to recall the last time they'd made love.

There was still no word from Stephanie.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Gareth called her mobile, but only got through to voicemail. Mindful of her bullying and no doubt snooping husband, he stopped short of leaving a message.

Within days, however, he was babbling to her answering service: 'Please, please talk to me.'

And all the while Anna was acting more and more strange, at one point even hinting that they should take their first holiday together for at least five years. Gareth, bewildered on every front, just wanted to cry most of the time.

When nervous exhaustion finally prevented him from going into work, Anna brought him breakfast in bed. It seemed too sinister for words. Almost as soon as she returned downstairs, he crept to the bathroom and flushed away the orange juice and corn flakes.

Things soon got worse, when he felt the first irrational suspicion that he had been duped, the whole thing some sadistic game. Suddenly angry with Stephanie, scared and irritated by Anna, he fell into a sort of delirium, beset by images of the two women lifting him up and hurling him into a pitch–black chasm.

LIVING IN THE PAST

In one of his rare lucid moments, he fought the bad thoughts about Stephanie. No, she loved him, something was happening to prevent her from getting in touch.

He shivered when it occurred to him that her partner might be another aggressive control freak. He frantically read through her emails again, and there it was all of a sudden. A clue to her whereabouts – he hoped – staring him in the face.

South London, she had said, nothing more, not the slightest hint of an address. She hadn't even divulged her new surname. But there was one throw–away remark about going for a drink with a girlfriend to a pub called The Enchanted Moon.

A Google search told him that there was only one pub with that name in the whole of London. He printed off Stephanie's image from her website and began to pack some clothes. After checking train timetables, he left it until four in the morning before cautiously opening his bedroom door. He remembered from their days in the same bed that Anna was a light sleeper.

He was feeling with his foot for the top stair – the first step to freedom, he was thinking – when a sound came from behind him. The landing light went on. And there she was. Back to looking puzzled, before she saw the suitcase in his hand. Then it was back to looking a lot more like her old self, screeching out the words.

'*What are you doing?*'

Gareth trembled. It's the eyes, he thought, they always seem to see right through me. Staring at him, Anna seemed to back up his supposition, saying, 'I thought something was going on. You've met someone, haven't you?'

To his surprise, her voice had gone down several decibels.

'No, no. Well ... yes.'

Gareth could feel his knees sag in time with the final word. He gave thanks that they weren't in the kitchen, with sharp objects to hand.

Yet somehow, astonishingly, Anna appeared to be less angry than anxious. Bullies always buckle when you stand up to them, he told himself without much conviction. But the thought was enough to drive him into speaking again, this time with a little more assurance.

'Yes, I have met someone.'

In the ensuing silence, as he prepared to duck, an absurd paraphrase of one of Winston Churchill's sayings popped into his head. We shall fight on the landings.

But Anna was slowly unclenching her fists. 'I thought we were getting on so much better,' she said.

It was Gareth's turn to stare. She hadn't come so close to appeasement since the time she'd only kicked him once during one of her assaults. What the hell was going on?

She even sounded different, a pleading note he had never heard before. 'You can't go.'

Gareth was growing angry, thinking he should already be on his way to London. He cursed himself for his clumsiness in getting caught. Then he cursed Anna, though the words never quite reached his tongue. Best not to push her too far. Instead he worked hard to control his voice. 'I've had enough'.

Her reaction was immediate, the shriek restored. '*You can't go!*' At the same time, moving to the head of the stairs and raising her scrawny arms to block off his escape route. It was a familiar tactic of hers, shouting him into submission while st the same time threatening grievous bodily harm. But now something seemed very different.

Then he realised what it was.

He could see fear in her eyes.

The thought flashed through his mind, she's afraid of being left on her own. I'm scaring *her*. I'm winning for once! Gareth had always been a modest chap – after all, in another of Churchill's phrases, he had a lot to be modest about – but at that moment he couldn't help mentally waving to an invisible cheering crowd. Anna read his face with an expression of horror on her own features, before slumping in a heap against the wall.

With his victory seemingly assured, Gareth moved to step gingerly around her. No pity, he warned himself. Do to her what she's been doing to you all these years.

Anna reached out in appeal and said in a sluggish voice, 'I thought you loved me.'

Gareth had gone past the point of being amazed. Desperate now to escape from Anna in Wonderland, he pushed her away.

Lethargic gastropod turned into venomous shrew in an instant. '*You're not leaving! You bastard!*'

She charged at him, her hands like claws. As he defended himself, a rallying cry ran through Gareth's head. *Stephanie, Stephanie!*

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LIVING IN THE PAST

He got to London much later than he would have liked, moving in a daze through the crowds to the underground station. The Enchanted Moon was a short train ride away, located in what was neither the deprived inner city nor well–to–do suburbia. Staring around at the area's many residential streets, Gareth prayed for the pub to be her local, where the attractive and intelligent face would be instantly recognised.

He soon found the pub. Even through the pain that had been lodged between his eyes ever since leaving the house, he noted it had been tastefully restored to its original Edwardian splendour. There was hardly anyone in the place as he showed Stephanie's photo to the bored–looking barmaid.

The woman shook her head. 'Don't know her.'

After getting the same answer from the two old men who were the only other customers, Gareth waited until the evening shift came on and the pub started to fill up. Then he went round and round the room, but the nearest to a positive response was when someone wolf–whistled at the photo. Gareth had the urge to punch the man in the face.

Another sign of turning into Anna was the increase in the volume of his voice as the evening wore on, the unaccustomed alcohol adding rowdiness to his frustration. But it was only when he started to howl in the middle of the crowded room, 'Stephanie, I need you!', that he was asked to leave by one of the bar staff.

Out on the street, he had to prevent himself from howling again by an act of willpower. Instead he trudged and trudged, causing several lone women to cross the road as they saw him approach. He was passing the tube station for the third or fourth time when he decided to ask at the newspaper kiosk about the nearest police station.

Then he saw her.

Stephanie.

The man behind the counter must have thought he was having a stroke. 'You alright, mate?'

But Gareth's eyes were frozen to the front page of the *Evening Standard*. The image was the same as the one in his jacket pocket, the picture he had been waving around in the pub. It was the accompanying headline, though, that had him petrified, made him want to tear out his heart.

'Woman's body found. Search for missing husband'.

The story was breaking news, short and to the point. Stephanie had been found in the boot of her car, battered to death, and a full–scale manhunt was underway for the chief suspect. With the old newpaper seller calling out something

from behind him, Gareth staggered off. Within minutes, he was being sick into a dustbin behind an apartment block.

Karl Marx's remark that history repeats itself as farce found its way into his head and he laughed until he was sick again. It had turned out to be a black comedy alright, rummaging around in the past. He should have stuck with his textbooks. Stephanie would presumably still be alive if he hadn't felt the urge to roll back the years. As for Anna ...

He wondered again about the nearest police station. Time to go there with his story.

It brought to mind what had happened, what must be happening, back at the house. He recalled with a shudder the vicious tussle at the top of the stairs, the frantic wielding of a heavy bronze bowl as a weapon. He knew Anna had arranged to meet up that same day with her friend Christine, another harridan. No doubt she had already set the ball rolling after being stood up on their lunch date and getting no reply to her phone calls.

Stephanie dead! Gareth wondered where he was, the wife killer. Being hunted like a dog, he hoped. Then it struck him.

That makes two of us.

THE WAIT

Mark Watkins felt his depression lift a little when he saw the main station was back in business. Good, the wreckage had finally been shifted. The past couple of weeks had been even more hellish than usual, with massive queues at every bus stop and people practically fighting to get on board, standing room only. Perhaps now he would find a seat on the way home.

He again gave silent thanks that he lived on a direct bus route. Otherwise he might have been directly involved in the disaster. The commuter special had come off the tracks just outside the city, with eight people dead, several more badly hurt. He shuddered at the thought.

In fact, lots of things in his life made him want to shudder. The continuing uncertainty at work. Joanne being so demanding, all her talk about getting a new conservatory. No consideration of the fact that he could be made redundant at any moment.

The scorn in her voice. 'If it was left to you, we'd still be living in that awful little flat.'

There was some truth in her accusation, he knew. He wasn't a risk–taker. Even the modest size of their present mortgage caused him the odd moment of panic.

Some of his work colleagues were chancers like his wife. One of them talked as if he was actually looking forward to losing his job in the imminent downsizing exercise. 'Can't you see it's the perfect opportunity for a career change?' he kept insisting.

Mark saw only calamity ahead. My life is like a train about to come off the rails, he told himself, before feeling guilty at the thought. At least he was still alive. For what it was worth!

This succession of gloomy thoughts was crossing his mind as he approached the station on his way to the office. He saw a slender shape standing just inside the main entrance, looking towards the concourse. Though the woman had her back turned to him, Mark somehow knew – perhaps it was the set of her shoulders – that she too was feeling tense and unhappy. He wondered what her problem was and for a moment felt sorry for her. Then he returned to his more usual pastime of feeling sorry for himself.

The next few days were spent keeping his head down, in the office and at home. One morning he realised he was even literally doing it, looking towards the ground as he walked along, back to his old habit of stepping over the cracks in the pavement. He had spent a part of his early teens believing that the practice would keep away bad luck.

There was no chance of that happening, of course.

Things soon came to a head. First, Joanne broke the news over breakfast that she had arranged for someone to come to the house to talk about the new conservatory. Kick a man when he's down, Mark thought, knowing it would be useless to make any sort of protest. It was D–Day at work, too, with an official announcement about the scale of the redundancies. He felt certain his name was already on a shortlist somewhere.

When he got off the bus, he thought he would give his recently re–acquired habit one more chance. But then he bumped heavily into someone as he was passing the railway station. He looked up to see a pair of fierce eyes staring at him. The man seemed ready for a confrontation, his tone belligerent. 'Watch where you're going. Dozy sod!'

'Sorry, sorry,' Mark mumbled.

Swivelling his head self–consciously as the man stalked off, he immediately saw the blonde woman from the previous week – he felt certain of it – standing with her back to him inside the station entrance. As if she was waiting for someone. On almost the exact same spot, he decided. Again he could tell that all was not well with her, and sighed with fellow feeling before returning to his own worries.

They were told that the job losses would be even more far–reaching than envisaged. That evening, Joanne couldn't stop talking about her new conservatory. Her voice seemed to be coming from a long way away. He wondered if he was in a state of shock.

That feeling intensified in the next few days. His eyes too went on the blink, and he found himself blindly passing close work colleagues in the corridors. His head never stopped aching. After he decided not to go in one morning, the seriousness of their situation even began to penetrate through Joanne's self–absorption.

'You're going the right away about being at the head of the queue when they sack people.'

She gave him a look of concern that touched him for a moment. Then he wondered miserably if it was more to do with losing her conservatory than him losing his job.

But he knew she was right. With a great effort, he boarded his usual bus the next day.

The woman was there at the station entrance. He wondered how he could tell

it was her from behind when he had difficulty in recognising people he'd known for years. Her shoulders looked more slumped than ever, but for some reason that cheered him up. There are people worse off than me, he told himself. I should walk over and start up a conversation. We could tell each other our problems. It would be a comfort for both of us.

He was still in a daydream when he was forced to step aside as a surge of people from one of the commuter specials jostled through the gates. As the crowd thinned out, he looked for the waiting figure again. She was gone. But the feeling that perhaps things were not so bad lingered for the rest of the day. His senses had been restored to reasonable working order, and he even got a rare compliment from his line manager for a piece of good work.

He watched out for her the next morning, but she wasn't there. It was another week before he saw her again.

His thoughts were in a less chaotic state by then – Joanne having reluctantly conceded that the conservatory should be put on hold – and he laughed at the idea of going up to the woman. She'd probably shout for assistance. Glancing over, he saw her adjust her head so he was able to catch a glimpse of the side of her face. It confirmed she was young and pretty. One puzzle was that she seemed to be wearing the same clothes as last time. Then he thought, good for her, remembering the cupboardful of female clothes in their bedroom, some of which he was sure Joanne had never worn.

Jostled from behind, he was forced to walk on, so it was only afterwards, as he settled in front of his computer, that he wondered if the woman had been about to turn around. He wondered what she would look like face–on. Again the strange idea that he ought to speak to her. The growing conviction that her troubles were a lot more substantial than his.

He felt sharper than he had for years that morning, and readily agreed to come in early for the next few days to help with a special project that had just started. 'If you continue like this, Mark, you'll begin to impress me,' his line manager joked. For the first time, Mark dared to think that, maybe, he could escape the drop.

After the special project was successfully completed, he reverted to his normal hours. Perhaps a day later he saw the young woman waiting in her usual spot. He noticed that one small foot was tapping with what seemed like impatience. All at once, it struck him that he only ever saw her at certain times. Perhaps once a week, and then only when he caught his usual bus. What's she doing there? he wondered. Who's she waiting for?

One new development was that she had turned her head to one side so that her profile was now entirely visible. He could make out full but downturned lips, upturned nose. Again the hint that she was about to turn around and face him. But then she looked back towards the concourse.

No more need to guess or assume. That one fleeting glimpse had confirmed how sad she looked. He suddenly felt an almost irresistible urge to walk the few yards across to her and put his arms around her shoulders. Poor thing, he said under his breath, coming to a halt, wondering if he was about to do something very foolish.

At that moment, a mass of people erupted from the concourse and the woman was swallowed up in the crowd. Mark resumed walking, looking back over his shoulder as he went, but couldn't make out her slim form anywhere.

That same day he was called into his manager's office and told that his job was safe. There was even a promotion on the cards. He almost kissed the man, and in the evening actually kissed Joanne with a fondness he hadn't felt for months. At the same time, he could see the danger signals in her eyes, and said in his new, more confident voice, 'We'll get it one of these days, don't worry.'

To his surprise, his wife just nodded. 'OK,' she said.

The next morning, walking past the station, he was disappointed not to see the loitering figure. A curious notion had been forming in his head, he realised. The idea that his change of fortunes had somehow been triggered by his fleeting encounters with the young woman, someone he'd never spoken to, hadn't even looked in the face. It's total madness, he told himself. But I'm definitely going up to her the next time – if she's still upset.

Not long after, with the bus company hit by a strike, the train was forced to take the strain. Standing crammed among all the other long faces on the seemingly endless journey from his local station into the city, and then returning home in the same cattle truck conditions, Mark could feel himself getting hot and bothered again. Especially after he overheard a young couple talking one morning.

'This is the same time train, isn't it?' the woman was asking the man. 'You know, the accident.'

'Yeah,' said her companion, a teasing look on his face. 'What was it, eight dead?' He grinned wickedly as she made an anxious little sound.

Their conversation soon turned to other topics, but left Mark struggling to piece together the thoughts that had started to buzz through his head.

He googled the train disaster when he got to work and saw it had taken place

on Wednesday 8 October. He remembered back to his intermittent sightings of the woman. The last time had been when he'd done a presentation about an important new project. Six days ago. And tomorrow was a Wednesday. By now, his thoughts were taking on a definite and rather disconcerting shape. Another crazy idea, he tried telling himself.

That evening he was so quiet and preoccupied that Joanne asked, 'Everything *is* alright at work, isn't it?'

'Of course it is,' Mark reassured her in his new, more upbeat voice.

But after she went to bed, he got back onto the internet. The train crash had been big news for a time, in the national papers and on TV. Mark had to dig around for a while but eventually found what he wanted on a tabloid website. A gallery of the dead. Four of the eight had been women and three of the men had been middle–aged, a bank manager and two senior civil servants travelling together. Only the eighth victim seemed the right fit. Like him, a man in his late twenties. The idea came back to him, stronger than ever.

Tony Cropper had been his name. A maths teacher. Still living at home with mum and dad. About to be married to his childhood sweetheart. The image showed an unremarkable face, notable only for the deepset eyes, A coincidence that, Mark thought, it makes him look a bit like me.

Having spent much of the night on his research, exhaustion added an edge to the nervous anticipation he was feeling when he forced his way onto the train the next morning. He wondered if his new–found confidence and courage would enable him to go through with it.

He tensed as they came into the city. It was a gloomy November morning and the darkness outside seemed to have crept under the vast canopy of the concourse. Even the powerful overhead lights were fighting a losing battle.

He knew he was going to see her, of course.

About to get married. That fact had taken on ever more significance in his mind.

But how could he avoid frightening her? She would think he was a nutcase. The words sounded outlandish and intrusive even in his head: *I know why you're here. He was your fiance, wasn't he? Tony Cropper. Always caught this train. That's why you come here every Wednesday morning.*

But what he wanted to say more than anything was: *I'm so sorry for your loss, but seeing your sadness has somehow enabled me to put my life back on track. I just feel I have to thank you.*

Yes, she would definitely think he was a nutcase. A self–obsessed and insensitive nutcase at that. He could feel his resolve weaken.

Then he saw her waiting at the station entrance. The finer details of her features were a blur in the murk, but he could just about make out that she was squinting in an apparent effort to pick out someone from the surge of people coming towards her. He was still several yards away when a smile of relief came to the pretty face, making her appear radiant even in the poor light. Her shoulders seemed to lift.

Surprised, Mark felt she was looking at him. Just then, a shove from behind forced him to stumble and he looked around reprovingly. When he turned back, the woman had gone.

He never saw her again.

After several weeks of suspense, expecting to see her every time he passed the station on Wednesday mornings, he finally accepted that she had given up on her vigil, act of remembrance, or whatever ever it had been. Though regretful that he'd been unable to thank her, he felt glad she was obviously getting on with her life. He was doing the same, though with a lot more success than he'd had before encountering the young woman. The promotion was going through, bringing with it the promise of an extra five grand a year. And Joanne seemed happy with her suddenly more assertive husband.

The woman had slipped to the back of his mind by the time he realised the first anniversary of the train crash was coming up. He remembered the date well from his internet research.

With the returning memories came the idea – no, the certainty – that he was going to see her again. He wondered what he would do. The strong suspicion that he still wanted to talk to her.

She was in her usual place on the morning of the anniversary. The same profile, different clothes. When Mark came to a halt, he noticed with mild surprise that there were several other people with her. That, he thought, is going to make things a lot more difficult.

At the same moment, the young woman turned and caught his eye. A moment of shock on her attractive face, before she gave him a quick smile. Though expressing apology rather than relief, it reminded Mark of the last time he had seen her. He smiled back, encouraged, and took it as a sign.

She had some flowers in her hand; and a number of her companions were also carrying small bouquets. As he approached, he could see the growing doubt in her eyes. Bet she wishes she hadn't smiled at me, he thought.

He rushed to get the words out before he changed his mind. ‘I’m sorry to bother you, but I’ve seen you here before. On Wednesday mornings. You know, after the crash ...’

His voice trailed off as she stared at him. One of her friends, short but burly, rushed over to them. He gave Mark a strange look and then turned angry.

‘Is he bothering you, Kate? Are you a reporter? Leave us alone!’

The young woman touched his sleeve. ‘It’s alright, I think there’s been a mistake.’

She turned to Mark, sounding mystified. ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never seen you before.’

‘But, but ... you seemed to recognise me just now.’

‘You just reminded me of someone, that’s all.’

Something seemed to click in Mark’s brain. Wondering at what stage the man would get really belligerent, he took a deep breath. ‘I know. Tony Cropper.’

As the full red lips parted in surprise, her friend pushed Mark in the chest.

‘OK, that’s it. Bugger off!’

To Mark’s surprise, she remonstrated with him. ‘Stop it, Kevin. Please leave us alone for a moment.’ With a parting scowl, he rejoined the others.

The woman had recovered her poise but still looked baffled. ‘What would you say if I told you I’ve never been to this station in my life before today?’

‘I would say one of us is going mad.’

She frowned at him, then smiled with comprehension. ‘Oh, I know. It must have been my twin sister Tracey. She used to come here every morning to meet Tony off the train.’

‘Your twin? Oh, that explains it. That’s who I saw.’ He hesitated for a moment, thinking back to the lonely figure at the station entrance. ‘She must have loved him a lot.’

She nodded her blonde curls. ‘Yes, they were soul mates,’ she murmured.

Mark looked over to her companions. ‘Is she here, Tracey? I wanted to thank her for something.’

Suddenly her eyes were wet, her voice reduced to a whisper. ‘She’s dead.’

It was Mark’s turn to gape. He suddenly wished he was at his desk, at home, anywhere else. ‘I’m so sorry. I hadn’t realised ...’

She was smiling through her tears. ‘Of course you didn’t.’

They stood in silence as streams of commuters bustled around them. Mark badly wanted to comfort her, but had to content himself with almost patting her on the arm. Not only pain but puzzlement lingered on her face.

THE WAIT

‘I still don’t understand how you could have seen her. After the accident, I mean.’

‘But isn’t that why you’re here? At the spot where she used to stand?’

For reply, the young woman pointed towards the knot of people who were staring across at them, a sullen Kevin in their midst. ‘They’re mostly Tony’s family. I sort of got talked into coming along.’

The look she gave him made Mark wonder if she indeed thought he was fit for the madhouse. ‘When did you last see Tracey?’

‘It was several months ago now, but definitely in November.’

‘It couldn’t have been her,’ she said decisively.

Grief does funny things, Mark thought. ‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘Because she moved away from here and stayed with me up north immediately after Tony’s funeral. She was in a terrible state.’

A premonition shivered through Mark, making it impossible to keep an urgent, insensitive note out of his voice. ‘When did she die?’

The woman studied him intently, almost fiercely, for a moment, then seemed to make up her mind. ‘I told you they were soul mates. It was obvious she couldn’t live without him. She killed herself two weeks after the crash.’

Now Mark was whispering. ‘But that means ...’

The blue eyes softened. ‘Were you under some sort of strain at the time?’

Mark considered. ‘Yes, yes, I was.’

‘Perhaps that explains it. You know, you could have seen Tracey before the accident, and then confused her with someone else’

‘Yes, perhaps ... anyway, sorry to have bothered you.’

As he hurried away, he took a last glance over his shoulder. She had turned back to her companions. Even the hairstyle reminded him of her twin.

Mark kept thinking as he walked. Thanks for everything, Tracey, he said to himself. Then he thought some more – of the railway station on that dark winter morning and the girl’s unexpected smile of relief. And then it came to him what he had done without even knowing it. Glad I could return the favour, Tracey. Rest in peace.

That evening he agreed with Joanne that they should order the conservatory.

TOUCH WOOD

Mum was a great believer in old wives' tales. Cross the road rather than walk under a ladder, that sort of thing. And she was a dab hand at keeping the rest of us in line. I must have been about eight years old when I got several clouts across the head for opening an umbrella in the house. Poor dad was more under the thumb than anyone. He once confided to me – in a very low voice – that he always allowed her the long half of the wishbone at Christmas to avoid a sulk through to Boxing Day.

So it was just another superstition, but also for a time one of her few endearing habits, the phrase she used whenever she wanted to counter any possible bad luck.

'It might be OK. Touch wood.'

'Touch wood, that'll do do the trick.'

I looked up the origin of the saying recently. One line of thought is that it began as an incantation to ward off evil, and dates back to pre–Christian times when trees such as the oak and holly were regarded as sacred. Another idea sees it as an appeal for good fortune by referring to the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

With a foot in either camp, so to speak, I like both theories.

I began to think of mum as a pagan after learning about the Ancient Britons in junior school. It seemed to explain why she was so in love with the vast garden around our home, the cottage that had been left to dad by his dead parents. The Forest, as she called it, was extensive and overgrown and teemed with unrestrained shrubs and fruit trees that were taller than the house. On fine summer days, she liked to twirl and glide through this wilderness in a flowing white dress, like some sort of druid princess communing with the old gods.

In actual fact, God in mum's world tended to equate to hard cash

If you had been trying to create an opposite to mum, you would probably have come up with dad. He was a shop assistant in the nearby town, a man who was studious and unworldly and looked scared out of his wits half the time. He had been brought up as a staunch Baptist, but mum wouldn't allow him anywhere near a chapel.

Their contradictory genes must have mingled in me to produce a bookworm with a nasty streak (more of that later). My brother Wayne, on the other hand, was pure mum, a sort of feral male version of her, thuggish and malicious even as a small boy. Sometimes it was hard to tell which of them despised dad the most.

I liked the old man, while concluding from a very young age that he was pathetic.

TOUCH WOOD

The first few years in our matriarchal mini–universe were, I suppose, happy enough. Those were the days when mum's sense of playfulness at least partially offset her cruelty. Wayne and I would dance with her through the trees, and she sometimes told us bedtime stories about the elves and pixies that visited the Forest at night.

My older brother was not at all a good role model for me, going out into the fields almost daily to shoot down birds and small animals with his airgun. When he was slapped or shouted at by mum for breaking one of her hundreds of rules, his slaughter could become quite inventive. I once saw him hang a grass snake from a tree branch until the poor thing died. I connect my first nightmare with that incident.

But it wasn't until I was seven and he was ten, already a hulking brute of a boy, that he managed to shatter my innocence beyond repair.

A family called Cartwright lived close by and we often played with their three children. The youngest girl, named Rachel, was about my age. It was a cold and drizzly autumn day, I seem to remember, and I was wandering through the Forest on my own when I heard the sound of raised voices. A high–pitched squeal followed by an explosive sort of grunt. In my childish way, I ran towards what sounded like an interesting game.

Then I saw Wayne wrestling with Rachel. He let go of her when he saw me and she quickly ran off. I expected him to be angry for spoiling their fun, but he just gave a malevolent smile. Then he went into graphic detail about what Rachel had under her dress.

It was the first time I knew sex even existed.

I don't think I ever played with Rachel again.

My brother had no such woman problem. By the time he was sixteen, he had already gone through several girlfriends, none of whom he treated particularly well. I even saw him punch one of them in the stomach. But the thing I could never understand was that it was always Wayne who did the dumping, never the girl.

Mum put his success down to the twinkle in his eyes. Needless to say, she was very proud of him. Sneering at dad, 'Lucky he takes after me and not you.'

By that time, Wayne had got a job on one of the nearby farms. Lumpish and thick–headed, he might have been specially designed for hard labour. Even at age thirteen, the prospect of doing something similar didn't thrill me in the slightest. I never voiced any open dissension, though, because mum made it known that working in the open air should be the height of anyone's ambition. Being a man, she called it.

But at least dad was quietly encouraging me to do well in my studies. It became a favourite, wistful phrase of his: 'You could be the first in the family to go to university.'

Given her philosophy, this proposition was wisely never put to mum.

'About time you got off your arse and started earning,' she was always telling me.

Not that that rule applied to her, and for a time she spent her days hanging out with a group of hippies who lived in some tipis they'd erected on the nearby common. At home, her domineering behaviour reached new levels of semi–sadism, as if she blamed us for the fact she couldn't be a permanently free spirit.

It became a repeated refrain for a while, no longer in the least bit endearing. Whenever anyone annoyed her, she would religiously reach out to one of our shabby sideboards or tables or cupboards.

'One of these days, touch wood, I'll be shot of the lot of you!'

Dad, of course, took the brunt of her anger and frustration. One day, when he was at work, she shoved several of his books on a bonfire she and Wayne had started to get rid of some rubbish. Winking slyly as she did so, as if daring me to tell him.

Not long after, when the hippies decided to ride off into the sunset, she took us boys to see them before they left and I got the impression they were in a hurry to get away. I overheard a couple of them joke with each other as they loaded their old VW camper.

'I'll be glad to see the back of her.'

His mate laughed. 'Yeah, she's more of a prickly thorn than a flower child.'

Their departure seemed to unleash her full fury. For the next few weeks, she made life even more of a hell for all of us. She had never been even a half–decent cook, but our meals began to resemble the sort of thing a starving dog would spit out. When her voice wasn't at full blast, it seemed to be soft with menace. Dad spent most of his time at home cowering in his room – they hadn't shared a bed from before I went to the big school. Wayne, too, stayed away from her as much as possible, drinking and fighting and chasing under–age skirt most evenings.

That left me. And yet, in spite of the constant clumps around the ear for stupid things like letting a tap drip, I never actually hated her. Somehow she seemed too stupid to hate.

Anyway, she finally let up on me as we went into a spell of sunny weather. Wearing her long white dress again, she even asked me to dance around the garden

with her. Going along with it because I had no choice, I made sure to put on my best false smile.

And then came the incident that changed our lives. Or so I like to think.

I was rushing to get ready for school, I remember, while mum mooched around our disgusting kitchen, not even pretending to make me any breakfast. Then all of a sudden it looked as if she was having a heart attack. She jabbed her finger at my feet.

'You stupid fool!' she yelled.

I mentally rifled through her vast rulebook in an effort to identify my mistake. At the same time, even though I still had one of my battered trainers in my hand, I took several steps towards the front door in case I needed to make a quick getaway. Mum shrieked. Luckily for me, the enormity of whatever I was doing wrong seemed to overwhelm her. As she slumped heavily onto a kitchen chair, I made my escape.

When I returned home after playing out late – in an effort to delay the inevitable – she just looked at me in a peculiar way. Puzzled by the continued lack of retributive action, I dashed upstairs and knocked on my father's door. After I told him what had happened, he got out a thin book with the title 'An Explanation of Superstitions and Old Wives' Tales'.

'It helps to know what not to do,' he whispered, looking nervously over his shoulder. 'Now let me see ...'

It didn't take him long to track it down.

'Walking in the house with a single shoe on can lead to the death of one of your parents,' dad quoted.

I can't take all the credit, because Farmer Maslow certainly did his bit. And maybe mum didn't need our help. Perhaps she would have gone ahead with her craziness anyway. But I think I can honestly say that I put the idea in her head in the first place.

Farmer Maslow took over from the hippies in mum's life. He was a reclusive old bachelor who lived several fields over from us, and we were all amazed – not to mention relieved – when mum announced one day that she had accepted a job as his several–times–a–week cleaning lady. Dad later confided to me, in unbelieving tones, that it was her first paid work since they'd got married.

Her absences from home were welcome enough, but an unexpected bonus was that she became less volatile and aggressive even when she was around. I remember her sort of smiling at dad, and him being so intimidated that he hummed

a hymn under his breath for the rest of the evening, as if it was some some sort of protection against evil.

The onset of a spell of fine weather made her almost unnervingly cheerful. 'Touch wood, it's going to be another lovely day.'

But nothing prepared us for the shock of her making a proper roast dinner. And there was an even greater surprise during the meal (the veggies were only half–cooked, but no–one was going to tell mum for fear of spoiling her good mood and probably getting lukewarm gravy thrown in their face).

When she gazed benevolently at dad, the poor man looked as if he wanted to cry. 'You never go to church these days, Robert.'

Wayne gave one of his coarse bellows, but for once I was in complete agreement with him. We were both thinking: that's because you threatened to split his head open with an axe if he ever went near the place.

'I – I didn't think ...'

She even had the effrontery to look disapproving. 'You should go, you know, Robert. You mother would be so disappointed.'

I realised at once, of course, that something was badly out of kilter. Mum, with all the subtlety of a runaway tractor, was trying to persuade us that she had suddenly become a nice person. No way, I thought.

I now know that she was playing the long game. There was method in her madness.

It became obvious, even to Wayne, that she was more than a domestic to Farmer Maslow when she stayed over at his place one night (using the lame excuse that the old man was 'unwell'). I was surprised that my brother took it so badly. Dad and I would have welcomed them going away on a long cruise together.

When she finally got home, Wayne yelled out, 'Hore!'

I shut my eyes, expecting her to lay him out with a frying pan in spite of his size. Instead she took him for a walk in the Forest, where he ranted for a while, before finally quietening down. When they came back to the house, he was trailing after her almost meekly. Thinking back, that must have been when she recruited him into her little scheme. Even at the time, though, it felt to me as if something wasn't right.

My sense of unease increased when mum made it clear she was still dwelling on the great trainer blunder. I was getting ready for school, I remember, in a mad rush as usual, and she was making me a jam sandwich in a pathetic attempt at keeping up the pretence of being a reformed character.

The false jocularity in her voice was horrible to hear. ‘I hope you’ve got two shoes on, Jimmy. Don’t want both your parents dead, do you?’

When she sauntered towards the kitchen table, I knew exactly what was coming. Wayne was at home that morning, and I wanted to say: use him, he’s as thick as any plank.

‘Touch wood!’

As she said it, I caught a furtive look pass between them.

I remembered that moment several times in the days and weeks that followed. Wayne became louder and more obnoxious than ever, making my life an even worse hell with his sly rabbit punches and incessant crude innuendoes about my virgin status.

But dad had now become his chief target.

Contemptuously elbowing him aside to get into the bathroom first. Endless sneering about the fact he preferred reading books to watching telly. A coarse remark about farmers having bigger dicks than shop assistants (with a wink at mum as he said it). Dozens of pinpricks adding up to one massive pain.

Mum made a show of being neutral between them, but somehow I knew she was laughing herself sick inside. And in fact I have had it from the horse’s mouth that she was goading my malleable brother, in secret, into ever greater acts of terrorism against his father.

The purpose of the exercise, as Wayne later told me, was to drive dad away from the cottage and out of our lives. Perhaps she hoped he would go off to live with his daft spinster sister. A less charitable mind might think the plan was actually to hassle him into signing over the house to her. A really devious mind (like mine) might conclude that she knew exactly what would happen once she induced a semi–moron to play stupid and cruel games on a man whose mental health had always been fragile.

Money was the driver, of course. Farmer Maslow had many acres and no children. Dad had a son who could be bribed to get rid of him, one way or another. Presumably mum had the option of just walking out. Swapping dad for the old man. But, no, she wanted the lot.

Of course, dad never took her advice about going to church, but as Wayne’s campaign of petty intimidation intensified, I sometimes caught him mumbling what sounded like a demented sort of prayer to himself. It became more and more obvious that he was cracking under the strain; and I began to wonder if his final destination would be a loony bin rather than his sister’s place.

TOUCH WOOD

They were different even in their forms of madness, mum and dad. She was an egomaniac and he – with a lot more justification – had a persecution complex. And that's not to mention my dear brother Wayne, who by then was in full pyschotic flow. The one I really felt sorry for was me, stuck in the middle of this bunch of lunatics.

Dad's final disintegration kicked off when my brother put a dead worm in his bowl of pea soup (it probably improved the taste). After scooping the thing up in his spoon, dad went to his room without a word and stayed there for the next three days. When he emerged at last, with his face looking appropriately like a plate of mum's pea sludge, Wayne's first act was to trip him up, while our bitch mother looked on and made hypocritical tut tutting noises.

Dad hanged himself that night from an apple tree in the Forest.

At the inquest, several work colleagues testified to his odd behaviour in the weeks up to his death – talking to himself and jumping at the slightest sound. Our doctor chipped in about his long–term nervous condition. In a scintillating cameo, our distressed mum said he had been 'acting queer' for some time, but she had no idea why. No–one asked me to say anything at all.

I don't what he'd been expecting, but Wayne got a second–hand motor scooter for his efforts. It was all mum could afford after her master plan collapsed when Farmer Maslow wisely decided that he no longer wanted her in his house, let alone in his bed or his will. Serves you right for being a greedy cow, I thought. She ranted and raved against the old man for a bit, before settling down to a prodigious intake of vodka, gin, cheap wine, and anything else alcoholic.

It was two years later and we were in another spell of fine weather when mum went to her pagan gods.

Wayne was at work and I was in my room revising for my GCSEs when she decided to go on one of her sun–worshipping waltzes through the Forest. The place was more dense and entangled than ever, making progress hard enough at the best of times, and even more difficult in a long white dress and with a bellyful of rotgut. The coroner decided that she must have tripped, possibly as a result of getting her hem caught up in the undergrowth, before banging her head on an apple tree. The same one from which dad had hanged himself. This coincidence was all the rage in the local and even national news for a short time.

However, I must have been alone in appreciating another aspect of the dark humour of the situation. Not much luck in touching wood that time, dear mother, I thought.

After we buried mum, Wayne and I continued to live in the cottage. Wanting

to confirm my long–held suspicions, I eventually asked him about dad's death. Wayne couldn't resist boasting.

'Yeah it was mum's idea, but it was me did the business.'

The only remorse he showed was about not getting paid enough for his hard work.

Since I could hardly bear to talk to him after that, we led virtually separate lives in our small house. Not that either of us was home much. I spent most weekends doing a couple of part–time jobs to get by, and when Wayne wasn't working he was indulging in his favourite hobbies of boozing, brawling and the endless pursuit of women (though he never looked anything but disgusting to me, his success rate was always the envy of the other neighbourhood lotharios).

Meantime, I have continued to be a model student and have had my reward with a place at uni. I am due to start there in a couple of weeks.

One recent development is the blossoming of Rachel Cartwright. It's strange, but after the episode in the Forest with Wayne, I scarcely paid her any attention as we went through school together. Some sort of subconscious aversion perhaps.

I've noticed her now, though. I popped into the Bell and Cow with some school friends after our exam results – only the second time I've ever been in a pub – and Rachel was working there. She looked a lot different with her hair up and wearing barmaid makeup. Older. Sexier. I was smitten.

Two nights later I went back and, with several whiskies festering in my guts, asked her out. She looked over to a rowdy group of regulars, my brother smirking amongst them, and seemed a little embarrassed. But then, as their jeering got louder, she said, 'I'd love to.'

As we ate in the only decent burger place in town, we agreed about how shitty life was in the sticks. I tried to persuade her – only partly in fun – to come and live in the city where I would be going to university.

'It's got a hundred places better than this,' I said, contemptuously gesturing around the fast food restaurant.

To my surprise and delight, she showed signs of being interested in the idea. A wistful look on her gorgeous face. 'Ooooh, that would be nice.'

I tried harder. 'You could do anything there, get any sort of job.'

When I returned to the cottage, my brother spoke to me for perhaps the first time in weeks.

'How d'you get on with little Rache?' There was a slyness in his eyes that reminded me of mum.

'Fine.'

'Had your tongue down her throat yet?'

I escaped to my bedroom with his boorish laughter following me the whole way. Later on, as I found myself unable to sleep, all sorts of schemes going through my head, I decided that I loved her almost as much as I hated him. She'll see the sense in getting away from this dump, I told myself.

Touch wood.

The next time I saw Rachel, I asked her if she'd thought some more about going to the city with me. She looked flustered. 'I'd love to, Jim, but it's not that easy.'

'Of course it's easy. We get on a bus together. Sorted.'

'But my parents ...'

'Sod your parents!' I said, thinking of the dysfunctional pair who had brought me into the world.

Then I saw it in her eyes. 'There's someone else, isn't there?'

'No, no, not really.'

It's one of the perks of being dragged up in an atmosphere of mistrust, you get an instinct for what people are really thinking.

'Who is it?'

'No–one. Honest.'

I was angry with her for lying, but felt even more strongly about my unknown rival.

The next evening Wayne was getting ready to go to the pub. 'Can I come with you?' I asked.

He stared at me as if I had just offered to give him a full body massage. 'You? This is a wind–up, isn't it?'

'No, its about time I let myself go a bit. Anyway, I need to get in some drinking practice for uni.'

By now there was a knowing smirk on his face. 'Oh, I get it! You're making sure Rache doesn't cop off with someone behind your back.'

Even my dense sibling was at the mind–reading game, but as usual he'd got his adding up all wrong.

I actually *wanted* Rachel to cop off with someone.

Then I would know.

It was Friday night and the pub was crowded with yobboes; most of the respectable people in the area drank in the Tavistock Inn up the road. After a quick acknowledgement, Rachel was kept too busy even to look my way again. I did enough watching for the two of us, slowly sipping my beer, keeping a close eye on

her.

No–one else in the place was even remotely interested in pacing themselves. And as the drink went down, so the aggression levels went up. Lots of macho posturing, accompanied by the occasional push and shove. Finally, as I was about to go home, disappointed that Rachel hadn't so much as looked twice at anyone the whole evening, all hell broke loose.

I could see my brother in the middle of the fray, swinging in all directions, and prayed for someone to deck him. Sometimes our wishes do come true. Over he went, clutching his ugly mug. In that same instant, I saw Rachel switch off her barmaid's smile. And then I knew.

As the fight tumbled into the road, I saw one of the combatants brandishing a bar stool like a weapon. Wayne was back on his feet and charged outside, punching any head that got in his way, I looked over to Rachel, but she had an anxious gaze on the open front door.

The mayhem was continuing in the dark as I began to make my sorry way home. I heard someone call out a bloodthirsty threat against my brother, and then there was the sound of an almighty collision. I ran for safety.

The postman found my brother in the Forest the next morning: it looked as if he had collapsed on his way back to the cottage. Yet another inquest – it's getting to be a family tradition – decided that he'd died as the result of several heavy blows to the head. Since any one of a dozen people involved in the punch–up could have done the damage, it seems unlikely that charges will ever be brought.

Rachel has taken it better than I feared. Freed of my brother's sinister influence, it wasn't long before she began to rely on me for everything. She is now seriously considering joining me in the city.

With not long to go before starting uni, I have been sorting out my life in other ways too. My extreme good fortune seems to be continuing. Only days after Wayne's death, I had a visit from a representative of a consortium of developers, who want to buy the cottage and land in order to build some expensive new houses. It doesn't seem to bother them at all that three people have met a premature end in our garden. They're obviously not sentimental types. A bit like mum. A bit like me, to be honest.

I'll be glad to see the back of our unhappy home. Too many memories. Too many bad dreams after each of their deaths. Especially the last two. Pushing mum with all my force against the tree after we argued about me staying on at school. Wielding a branch like a club against my awful brother as he staggered through the Forest that night. I can live with the nightmares, though, knowing I got the lot in the end.

TOUCH WOOD

Because the property isn't my only inheritance. My nasty streak, remember? Give mum her due, Wayne might have been more in her image, but she passed on a fair share of her greed and violent nature to me.

We cremated my defunct sibling the other day. Rachel looked beautiful in black and clutched my hand the whole way through the ceremony. I couldn't help chuckling inside, knowing that Wayne would have hated being anywhere near a religious service.

Everyone was extremely sympathethic to the bravely smiling survivor of so many tragedies. Orphaned and now brotherless. 'In spite of their differences, he really must have loved Wayne,' I overheard someone whisper. That sent a warm glow through me. What an actor I must be, I thought. Mum would have been proud.

People were especially impressed with the care I had taken over the funeral arrangements. I must admit I considered using a cardboard coffin at one stage. It would have served a dual purpose, not only eco–friendly but also just the right thing for sending Wayne into the after–life. Sort of like dumping a box of rubbish on a bonfire.

In the end, though, I settled on a more expensive option. This one, complete with fancy carving and brass handles, seemed much too good for my brother. But I had to be sure, you see, that it was not made of plastic pretending be something else.

Because there was one thing I felt I had to do. Sort of a last gesture to Wayne and a tribute to the mother to whom I owe so much.

Everyone was watching as I murmured a few words while stroking the coffin immediately before the service. There could hardly have been a dry eye in the house. In fact, as I sat down next to Rachel, I had a job controlling my own emotions. But it doesn't do to laugh at a funeral.

My little prayer had been: 'I hope you burn in hell. Touch wood.'

BOG LANE

As I've said a hundred times before, Katie wasn't a good driver. More like an accident waiting to happen. I loved her dearly, but no way should she have been in charge of a powerful Mercedes sports car.

Maybe she felt obliged to buy something posh and new. Because there were few other signs of her recently acquired wealth. She wasn't a great one for expensive clothes or holidays or parties. A bit of a recluse, to be honest, which probably explained her only other major purchase, a picturesque but secluded cottage along a winding single–track country lane.

More than one person in the office was obviously pig sick about her good fortune. 'I always hated the toffee–nosed bitch,' I overheard one woman say, before downing her umpteenth glass of free champagne at Katie's farewell bash. I wanted to slap her face.

The gossip eventually subsided as we returned to our dull routines. But I could sense that some of the general envy had transferred to me. People asked how she was, usually through the tightest of smiles, almost as if I was some sort of accomplice of the new millionairess. They all knew I was still in touch with Katie.

'You're the only person I ever really liked at that place,' she said, as she showed me around her cottage for the first time.

She had no need to slave as a deputy accounts manager any longer, of course, courtesy of her lottery win. But I couldn't help wondering how she was coping, stuck out in the back of beyond with nothing to do, no–one to see. So far as I knew, I was her only close friend. She didn't seem interested in men, never talked about her family. I put my concern into words. 'Don't you feel a bit, well, isolated?'

She smiled. 'You know me, anti–social to a fault.'

Then she told me she was planning to write a book. 'It's always been a secret ambition of mine,' she explained. 'And now I've got the peace and quiet and time on my hands, no more excuses.'

It turned out that her new home had been a chosen partly because of its location, close to a number of large country estates, not to mention scores of ancient towns and villages and the site of more than one battle in the English Civil War. 'Lots of churches with old graveyards, too,' Katie said with a twinkle.

Her aim was to write a romance with an historical theme. 'Sort of like Barbara Cartland, only with less gooiness and some hard facts.' She was hoping to find inspiration from her surroundings. 'Two hundred years old,' she cooed, gesturing back to her thatched cottage while she walked me to my car. 'Makes me feel a bit like Jane Austen!'

Too out–of–the–way for me, I wanted to say. An idea that was reinforced as

BOG LANE

I negotiated the dozen and more corners on my careful way back to civilisation – or at least the road to Bristol. The sensation of hedges pressing against the thin strip of tarmac; empty fields that swept up to a series of hillocks on either side, brooding in the fast fading light. No houses, no vehicles, not even any animals to be seen.

The thought came into my head that it wouldn't be a good place to break down. Stupid, I argued with myself, this is the English countryside, it's only a couple of miles from Katie's place to the main road. But why did the engine suddenly sound so loud?

When lights appeared through the gathering darkness, I let out a little puff of relief. The reassurance of other cars, other people. The inexplicable uneasiness fading, until my sense of humour was back in place. If that's Austen country, I thought, they can keep it.

It was almost a month before I saw Katie again. Only one reason for my negligence, I'm afraid – the man I had met on a night out with some of my more conventional friends. But she sounded cheerful in her phone calls and emails, said she was making good progress with her research.

Suffering from guilt, the relationship with the guy already going into decline, I was glad to accept when she invited me to stay for the weekend. The lane and its surroundings were again deserted, and again made me feel oddly uncomfortable. I wondered how it was possible to allow so much grassland to go to waste. But morning sunshine, together with the hawthorn flowers that studded the hedges, gave the place a superficial cheeriness.

Around a final bend to see the glow of whitewashed walls, mullioned windows winking out a welcome, soft breezes rippling across a luxuriant front garden. It looked appropriately like a setting from Mills and Boon, and went part of the way to explaining why Katie chose to live out in the sticks. She could do worse, I admitted to myself.

After lunch, Katie said she wanted to show me something. To my surprise, she pointed her new Mercedes away from the main road. Seeing my confusion, she said, 'We're visiting my nearest neighbours.'

'I sort of assumed it was a dead end up here,' I replied. 'Haven't seen any other cars.'

'Yes, it's funny about that. They always go the other way to town. Puts two or three miles on the journey, but everyone does it. Must be because the lane is so narrow.'

'There are places to pass,' I pointed out.

Katie shrugged. We both fell silent.

As we made erratic progress – too slow and then too fast – I felt grateful that we were unlikely to meet anyone coming the other way. I wondered if Katie even knew how to reverse her shining silver monster. The lane widened a little before we drove past a cluster of houses. The word village would be far too grand. A cat snoozing on a wall was the only sign of life.

'Mostly old people,' Katie explained. 'They don't get out much.'

We came to a T–junction a few hundred yards further on. A dilapidated signpost showed the way to town, but Katie turned in the opposite direction. The new road was scarcely wider than the lane.

After another couple of minutes we stopped in front of a small church that appeared to be very old and very neglected. The front door was heavily padlocked and there were rusted grilles on every window. I sensed the solitude of the place even before I stepped out of the car. Not a sound, not even birdsong. Katie led me along a path overgrown with vegetation to the back of the building.

It was a graveyard.

'I've only just discovered this place,' she said. 'Apparently it dates back to the seventeenth century. Think of that!'

Many of the headstones were indecipherable, their granite faces worn smooth by wind and rain. Some were teetering or had been turned over on their side. The few we could read had simple epitaphs for simple country folk. It looked as if the last person buried there had died in 1926.

'And now for my real find,' Katie announced.

She led me further away from the decaying building, into a tangle of plant life and through a thicket of stunted trees. As we struggled to avoid snagging our clothes and hair, I commented that it felt as if this part of the church grounds was deliberately being blocked off.

'That's clever of you,' my friend replied.

When I stumbled and reached out to keep myself upright, something stung my palm. I shrieked with pain.

Katie laughed. 'Don't be such a baby!'

We emerged from the trees and she pointed dramatically to a recent excavation in the overgrown and rank–smelling greenery. 'All my own work!'

A solitary gravestone, slime and moss scraped away from its surface, stood drunkenly against a crumbling stone wall. Two truncated words barely visible: *bes forgott*.

'I was just looking around this place and then the idea came to me that there

might be something behind the trees. A lot of old churches used to set aside a piece of land for burying still–born infants, suicides, that sort of thing.'

She gestured around her. 'So you know what this is, don't you?'

'Um, not exactly.'

'Unhallowed ground.'

Her silly grin indicated that she wanted me to prompt her. 'OK, does that thing belong to a baby or a suicide?''

'Neither.' She dropped her voice, presumably to increase the effect of her words. 'She was a witch. Her name was Ann Wetherwick.'

I looked again at the chipped and almost blank face of the stone.

'How do you ...?'

'How do I know that? Oh, I have my contacts in the hamlet back there. Well, one old lady really. No–one else seems to like talking about Ann. The most I get out of them is that she was a *very* bad woman. My old lady said she was burned at the stake.'

As I stared at her, the unnatural quiet seemed to deepen.

But only for seconds.

Because the silence was almost immediately destroyed by a howling noise from the thicket, something rushing towards us with a swoosh of leaves and demented clatter of branches, pushing ahead of it a massive increase in the stench of decay. Gagging and panicking simultaneously, I was about to scream when we were hit by a blast of cold air.

Katie saw my face and chuckled. 'It's just the wind, silly.'

'Please let's get out of here.'

After evading the clutches of the trees, we had a fit of the giggles as we ran to the car. While Katie struggled to get into first gear, I noticed a slate fly into the air from the church roof.

'They should turn this place into a haunted house.'

Katie continued to giggle. 'Yes, it *was* a bit spooky just now.'

'Is she going to be the heroine of your novel? Not very Barbara Cartland.'

We laughed all the way back to the cottage.

Having finished off a couple of bottles of wine that evening, we were both a little unsteady on our feet when Katie showed me to the guest room. 'Sleep tight,' she slurred. 'Don't let the bedbugs bite.'

'Where have I heard that before?'

'Oh, it's just an old saying.'

'You like old things, don't you?'

All at once, my friend sounded sober. ‘Funny, but I just can’t get her out of my head.’ Looking embarrassed, she left the room.

The wind must have picked up again during the night, because the rattling of the fence outside the house broke into my sleep in the early hours.

The morning light revealed a sky that was in complete contrast to the previous day, sullen and swollen with the promise of rain. Katie showed me the first rough draft of her novel, a story of lusty lords and lively ladies in the Regency period. But I could tell her heart wasn’t in the explaining, and could guess what was really on her mind.

She confirmed this by dropping into the conversation that she was planning to visit the museum in the nearest market town.

‘Bound to have lots of historical stuff there.’ Her eyes drifted away from mine. ‘Stories about local people, that sort of thing.’

That afternoon I made the mistake of not volunteering my car when we set off to visit one of the nearby country houses, and again felt glad about the absence of other vehicles in the lane as Katie performed her usual quick quick slow behind the wheel.

Her driving was no better when we returned from our grand tour and a pleasant meal in a pub restaurant. To further test my nerves, it began to rain from the belly of a black cloud almost at the exact moment we reached the final narrow stretch to the cottage. The landscape no longer looked dismal and suspect, more downright depressing, even malevolent. My spirits already low, I decided to go home before the weather got any worse.

Almost as soon as Katie waved me off from the shelter of her porch, however, the heavens opened, with one squall after another smashing into the windscreen of my little Peugeot. The black cloud now stretched all the way to the horizon, forcing me to switch on the headlights even though it was not yet seven on a midsummer’s evening.

With the hedgerows in a screaming frenzy, visibility reduced to yards, the wipers barely able to cope, I could feel the start of a tic under my right eye. Then, all at once, a blurred shape scurried out in front of us. I screamed and almost lost control of the car. The first sign of life on the lane and it seemed like the worst thing in the world. Fighting the temptation to speed up, I began to pray: please, God, let me make it to the main road.

Back home, just about able to laugh at my fears, I made up my mind that the creature had been a rabbit. A big rabbit. I chided myself for being another sort of animal. A scaredy cat. But I was restless all that night, and woke in a bit of a panic

towards dawn from a dream that someone was watching me as I walked along a country lane in the dark.

Katie was soon providing me with a stream of information about her research activities. It quickly became obvious that the novel was taking second place to her witch project.

'*Have been to the museum*,' she wrote in one of her early emails, '*and the curator has been very helpful.*'

Not long after: *'Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be much about the life of Ann Wetherwick. And only the odd snippet after death. But that's where it starts to get interesting.'*

'Listen to this,' she told me excitedly in one of her phone calls. 'It was written in his journal by the rector of our church, you know. In June 1762. To quote him: There have been disturbances in Bog Lane of late. Reports of intrusions that make people sore afraid as they go about their lawful business. A woman of the parish has died without explanation. I am tempted to wonder if there is some connection to the denizen of our churchyard.'

'Bog Lane?'

'You can't see the sign because it's been swallowed up by the hedge. But that's my address. Isn't it romantic? Bog Lane.'

About as romantic as sticking your head in an industrial food blender, I wanted to say.

Yet another email:

'Listen to this. It's an entry for 3 August 1835 in the diary of the Marquess of Fazakerly, you know, that country estate we visited.

"I hesitate to say as much, but it seems as if AW is again wandering among us. Three cows have dropped dead in their fields. Of even more significance is that the body of the blacksmith was found lying in a lane close to the high road to Bristol. They say he was foaming at the mouth."

There's another entry about a month later. "All is quiet. It seems as if that person has returned to Hell once more."'

The next time she called, I asked, 'What else are you doing with yourself?'

She sounded sheepish. 'Nothing, really. Don't go anywhere except the museum.'

I allowed my silence to speak volumes.

Only days later, I received an email containing a single sentence: *'Sometimes I wish I'd never started this.'*

I rang at once and she sounded nervy, almost on the point of tears. When she

said she didn't want to bother me, I insisted on driving over. I could sense the gratitude under her protestations.

My own nerves fluttering a little, I had to psyche myself up as I turned into Bog Lane that afternoon. Stop being so stupid, it's just a road. But everything seemed the same on the short journey – sinister but usual, neither man nor animal in sight. It helped that the day was fine and bright.

Only the cottage was different somehow. Its shining roof should have resembled a beacon signalling a safe haven, but instead put me in mind of the story of Hansel and Gretel; being read to as a three–year old, and the weeks of nightmares that followed. Not for the first time in my life, I cursed my over–active imagination.

Katie was waiting in her garden. She didn't look well. 'You've been overdoing it,' I accused.

Then I noticed the bruise under her fringe. 'What happened?'

She touched her forehead. 'Oh, this. It's nothing.'

'Tell me.'

'I had a slight accident.'

'That bloody car.'

She responded with a less than convincing laugh. 'Yes, that bloody car. I was probably going too fast, went into a skid.'

'Jesus, Katie!'

To my surprise, her laughter grew louder. But it still didn't sound right. She went to a sideboard and picked up a mass of papers, which she spread on the kitchen table. I could see some typed notes, a great many photocopied documents. 'Doctor Eden, he's the museum curator, has allowed me to bring away loads of stuff.'

Then, in a giggly voice that didn't go with the strain on her face, she announced, 'Ann Wetherwick, this is your life.'

She picked up one of the photocopies. 'This is quite probably our woman. It's an engraving taken from a seventeenth century treatise on witchcraft in this part of the world. If you look closely, you can just about make out her initials in the corner there.'

As she held out the crude caricature, almost the first thing I noticed was an indefinable creature skulking at the feet of the stereotypical hook–nosed witch. It was Katie's turn to look anxious. 'Are you OK?'

I pointed. 'What is it?'

'Her familiar. It's most probably a large cat. He wasn't a very good artist.'

Much too big to be a rabbit. I suddenly felt the need to sit down. Katie went into her front room and came back with a bottle of brandy that appeared to be considerably reduced from my last visit. ‘You look as if you could do with some of this. I know I could.’

We supped in silence. Catching her eye, I said, ‘Say something.’

The alcohol seemed to have had an instant effect on my friend, her giggle now carrying much more conviction. ‘My grandma always told me that if you haven’t got anything to say, don’t say anything.’

I wondered if she’d been drinking when she had her accident.

Looking for a way back onto the topic of Ann Wetherwick, I asked if she’d visited the scary church again, or the hamlet up the road.

‘They don’t want to know me, not even my old lady,’ she replied. ‘I suspect they think I’ve caused it to happen.’

‘It?’

‘I can tell Doctor Eden thinks the whole thing is a load of twaddle. But he’s another outsider, like me.’

‘It, Katie?’

‘Where I skidded, not far from the main road, it’s not the first time something bad has happened there.’ She held out her tumbler to the picture on the table. ‘Here’s to Ann Wetherwick and all who sail in her!’

She was beginning to worry and exasperate me in about equal measure.

‘If you won’t tell me what’s going on, Katie, how can I help?’

She leaned forward, her features screwed in a grimace. ‘How can you help when you’re in the same boat as me?’

A measured pause and then: ‘You’ve seen something on Bog Lane, haven’t you?’

I shrugged, confused. ‘No, not really. It’s just a feeling I get.’

Katie snorted and poured herself some more brandy. Another long and unsettling silence. When I finally spoke, unable to bear the suspense any longer, my voice sounded very loud. ‘What did you see?’

Her smile was back in place, tipsy but gentle. ‘Do you know, even the postman takes the long way around when he’s delivering letters.’ She tapped her nose. ‘Another insider.’

I just about held my temper. ‘What did you see?’

The words came out in a shudder. ‘I saw Ann.’

I stared at her, horrified, disbelieving.

‘I wasn’t sure at first. Like you, only a bad feeling. But then last time ...’

Wondering if I really wanted to know, I asked, ‘What was she doing?’

‘Nothing, just standing at the side of the road. But, oh, the look she gave me! I’ve hardly slept since.’

When we got to our feet and hugged, I could almost feel the hammer blows of her heart. ‘Please, Louise, you do believe me, don’t you? You don’t think I’m simply a stupid, drunk woman?’

Then, her eyes burning, she held me at arm’s length. ‘You don’t think I’m mad?’

I didn’t know what to think. Perhaps there wasn’t a single rational thought inside me at that moment.

‘Of course not,’ I said.

We sat down and talked some more, and Katie’s voice got lower and lower. Her story was short but terrifying. It started off with the shock of seeing the crooked shape of the witch as she rounded a bend in the lane. No evidence of surprise, however, on the fiendishly scowling features.

‘Almost ...’ my friend faltered, her own face turning ugly for a second or two, ‘... almost as if she was *waiting* for me.’

Katie in a blind panic, her foot slipping off the accelerator, the Mercedes swerving and juddering to a halt. The witch still watching – sunken eyes that seemed to stare right through her – as she somehow managed to start the engine again.

‘I think I even saw the cat,’ she whispered.

That decided me: no way am I staying here any longer.

The shrill tones of my mobile phone made us both jump. The call was from my new manager, reminding me that we were attending a meeting first thing in the morning. Katie, having worked with the man, knew him to be an unreasonable taskmaster.

‘He’ll hold it against you for the rest of your life if you don’t turn up. No, you have to go home.’ Smiling wryly. ‘Get some sleep.’

‘Well, come with me, then.’

‘No, impossible, I have to sort my stuff out first. Once I leave here, I never want to come back.’

She looked at me. ‘It’s OK. I’ll be fine in the cottage. She only ever appears in the lane.’

The sun was lower in the sky but still dazzling when she saw me to my car. ‘You can go the long way round,’ Katie suggested softly.

I gazed up at the brightness and recalled my earlier uneventful journey. Then I thought about having to drive even further along a narrow country road.

Katie saw my hesitation. ‘Go for it. Sod her. Anyway, you’re probably OK. The story is that not everyone sees her.’

We said our goodbyes. ‘A penthouse in that new development by the river, that’s what you want. You can ditch that bloody car, too.’

Realising what I’d said, I put my hand over my mouth. Katie snickered, but her eyes were already on the first bend. ‘I’ll be alright,’ I reassured her.

As soon as I set off, however, I began to wonder if I’d made a terrible mistake. Even with the sun beating down, the fields looked more desperately lonely than ever. I told myself to focus on the tarmac, but that only made me think about something scurrying out in front of the car.

What followed was easily the longest ten minutes of my life, half expecting to see the terrible figure in black as I rounded every corner.

Waiting for me.

I was unable to keep another old saying out my mind: if looks could kill. Remembering what Katie had said about her appearance. A countenance that indicated cruelty and vindictiveness beyond belief. A glare that said the witch wanted to tear her to pieces. Other–worldly evil lurking in a country lane.

‘Like a hitchhiker from Hell,’ she’d joked, in a futile attempt to lighten the mood.

On the edge of hysteria, I let out an almost primeval howl when I saw the glint of traffic ahead.

And then the sun went behind a cloud.

In spite of my efforts not to look, my gaze was attracted to a shadow rushing like a wave across the sea–green expanse of a field. I followed its movement to the brow of a small hill in the middle distance.

Something black standing there.

Something smaller beside it.

It still seems like a miracle that I wasn’t killed when I veered onto the main road – the man in the white van still features in my nightmares. As he shook his fist frantically, a horror on his face that must have matched my own, I screeched to a halt on the verge. Then I burst into tears.

I was a lot calmer when Katie rang that evening. ‘No problem,’ I told her.

The purpose of my brave face was to spare my friend; I told myself she didn’t need me adding to her worries. By then, too, I was having doubts about what I’d seen: reason and even scepticism were gaining the upper hand, arguing that the objects could have been people ‘going about their lawful business’, the stumps of trees, anything.

Anyway, something natural.

And so I said, 'No problem.'

The worst thing I've done in my life.

The attitude of my psychiatrist reminds me of what Katie said about Doctor Eden. He obviously thinks I'm talking a load of twaddle. Can't blame him, I suppose. It must be so much easier to attribute my story to a nervous breakdown.

No, I blame myself. It must have been my last words to her that encouraged my friend to negotiate the lane again. Because a police helicopter spotted the Mercedes the next day, ploughed into a hedgerow not far from the road to Bristol. Katie was slumped over the steering wheel, her neck broken. A look on her face that made me shudder and turn away when I was allowed to see her body in hospital.

Like everyone else – the police, doctors, the coroner – my psychiatrist has picked up on what I've told him about Katie being a bad driver. An accident waiting to happen. Which means that no matter how often I repeat the one fact, he remains convinced it was a coincidence.

To be honest, I sometimes wonder myself if we weren't simply two silly, hysterical females who worked themselves up into seeing ghosts. A bogeywoman. But then I remember poor Katie's dead face. And my own terrors on Bog Lane.

And the one fact.

When the car was found, its speedometer read '666'.

BORING

Other people's lives have always seemed more interesting than my own.

As a kid, I was in awe of my schoolmates, wishing I could swap my dull parents for theirs. Their houses always appeared to be bigger than ours and their family cars more exciting. While we were spending a week or two in dull and rainy Cornwall, they invariably went to wonderfully exotic places for their holidays.

In my teens, it became my habit to look into the windows of houses and wish it was me on the other side of the curtains. Just walking down the street could make me jealous, especially when I saw couples having a good time together. I have always found it almost impossible to act naturally around girls.

Since I was hopeless at sports and didn't like loud music, mates were also in short supply. It says it all that my only interest at the time was coin collecting.

I know: boring.

I didn't do well at school. 'No confidence in his own abilities,' a teacher wrote in one of my end–of–term reports. That about sums up the baggage I've had to lug around my whole life. I left school with the bare minimum of qualifications, just enough to get me into the bottom rank of the Civil Service. Please don't say the B word all at once. Needless to say, I was – and remain – a lowly pen pusher.

For all my recent efforts to change myself, the essential fact remains the same. I was boring then and I'm boring now.

On my first day at work I was almost reduced to tears after one of my new colleagues, a hulk in a hideous rugby shirt, asked me what I did in my spare time.

'Um, collect coins, I suppose.'

Their blokish laughter turned my stomach. The only one who sort of stuck up for me was Jason, and he remains the nearest thing I have to a friend in the office – or anywhere else. And I suspect that even he thinks I'm a sad case. But then who needs mates? Mates can let you down. The last thing I want right now is someone to confide in.

My hopes were raised, for a very short time, by the number of young women working in the Civil Service. Surely one of them would go out with me? In fact, they've been worse than the men. After finding out that I go red easily, they were always saying things to embarrass me. A girl called Molly is still the ring leader.

'Like licking stamps, do you, Gary?'

Making the words sound like the filthiest thing imaginable. Her cronies shrieking the place down as I turned beetroot. I've always hated the sound of female laughter.

I had another kind of woman problem at home. There were just the two of us after dad's death from throat cancer, and mum meant well, I know, but her constant

anxieties kept heaping on the pressure. She desperately wanted me to be like everyone else. Normal. She was forever encouraging me to become a different person.

'Why don't you join a night class? You'll meet people there. Perhaps a nice girl.'

'Nice girls aren't interested in me, mum. Nor any other sort, for that matter.'

'Nonsense.' Smoothing my hair in her irritating way, as if I was still ten years old.

I see it all now. One way or another, women have always been the main problem.

As I said, I'm still a lowly pen pusher. My yearly assessment reviews are like school reports for grown–ups. 'Could do better ... seems to lack any belief in himself.'

The funny thing is that my confidence levels have risen lately. But it hasn't made any difference to how people see me. How I see myself.

The B word again.

For example, there's a new girl at work. Simone is her name, and once or twice she's even smiled at me. She gives the impression of being a bit shy, not at all like the other girls. I'm sure a normal bloke would risk asking her out. But not me. Because, in spite of everything that's happened, I continue to be a social no–hoper.

I still can't talk to girls. Not properly. It was on the tip of my tongue the other day. 'Will you come out with me?' I was going to say to Simone, words I've never used before. Then I thought about how I would get through our first date, having to chat about nothing in particular. Just the thought of it made me cringe.

No, my new hobby will have to do. Did I mention that I no longer collect coins? Well I couldn't go on doing that for the rest of my life, could I? It was after mum died last year that I found myself this new interest. Had to fill the evenings somehow.

I suppose you think that alcohol would be one answer to my problem? Get plastered and lose my inhibitions. That's obviously what Jason thinks. He's asked me to go out with him to the pub a couple of times. 'I don't do pubs,' I told him, in what I hoped was a street–wise manner. It didn't work, though, because he looked at me as if I was mad. It's just another way I feel out of step with everyone else.

It beats me how anyone can enjoy stuffing themselves with poison. Drink is bad enough, but even worse is the thought of injecting harmful filth into my veins. Ugh. I might be a loser, but people who take hard drugs are even further down the scale than me.

BORING

I know what you're thinking. So far, so boring.

I hope this is where it gets more interesting.

The first thing to say is that – believe it or not – I'm pretty good at my new hobby. It's improved my self–confidence, to the point of rubbing off on everyday life. For a start, I'm getting on better with the women at work, not blushing so much when they come out with their stupid remarks. The other day I even responded to Molly's baiting with a joke.

'Going clubbing tonight, Gary?' she sneered as we were packing up for the weekend.

'Only if it was you I was clubbing,' I managed to get out. The others laughed, and even Molly forced a grim sort of smile. It's one of the few times I've ever felt proud of myself.

Everything was back to normal by Monday, of course, and I had my usual looking–through–the–window feeling as people chatted about the things they'd got up to at the weekend. Not just drinking and clubbing, some of them, but interesting activities like potholing and walking with their mates in the mountains.

I was jealous then and I'm jealous now.

I console myself with the fact that I have an interest of my own these days. Did I mention that I took it up after mum's death? Fell down the stairs, she did, broke her neck. It was hard work at first, having to cook for myself when I got home, but I've settled into a routine now. After the washing up, reading or perhaps a spot of telly.

But it can get lonely being on your own all the time. Bad enough for me to start making the odd night–time visit to nearby cities. They all seem to have red–light districts. Sometimes I would even follow the girls as they took their punters home, then look up at the lighted windows and try to imagine what was going on inside. It was a variation on something I've always been, I suppose.

A Peeping Tom.

I know what you're thinking. Not much of a hobby.

That's exactly what I thought. So there's been a further development in the past few months. I no longer simply look into other people's windows.

I prefer a certain type of girl and have become pretty good at picking them out in pubs and other places. Just from their looks. Me an expert on something, who'd have thought? Three times it's happened now. My confidence improves every time I stand over someone's bed in the middle of the night and watch them in their drug–addled sleep. They live in such filth, syringes and God knows what lying around. Sometimes I tell myself that I'm doing them a favour.

BORING

I'm sure you noticed I said 'nearby' cities. Never shit on your own doorstep, as one of our cruder members of staff likes to boast about his pathetic conquests. It's yet another way I'm proving adept at my new hobby, if I say so myself.

I occasionally dream of confiding in Jason, especially when I think he looks sorry for me. Prove to him that I'm not so uninteresting after all. But we'd have to be the best mates in the world for that to happen. No, let him go on thinking I'm a sad case.

Mum is the one who kicked it alI off, of course. Well, I did the actual kicking (by the way, that's another joke!) But she was more of an accident than anything else, irritating me to a moment of madness with her unwanted advice. However, I don't even have to add her to the list to qualify under the FBI definition of my activities, and it sounds good when I say the words to myself. I certainly feel important when I see the news on telly.

The trouble is, it never lasts. The other day I was standing behind a cupboard door when I overhead Simone talking to another woman. The bitch – excuse my language – was sort of goading her about eligible men in the office.

'Go on, who do you fancy?'

'I told you, no–one.'

An evil chuckle. 'How about Gary?'

I was surprised and even a little flattered by the slight hesitation before she answered, 'No.'

'So you agree he's the dullest man in the universe?'

I held my breath, but needn't have bothered. Simone giggled. 'Well. he's not exactly the life and soul of the party.'

That's what I think, too.

You have to admit, it takes some doing.

A boring serial killer.

NOISE

It was the noise. She had never liked noise.

Ironic, really, given the way things had turned out, but Alan had been as quiet as a mouse all through their courting days. His soft voice pleased her, and anyway they could go for hours without exchanging a word. Just the way she liked it.

She had insisted on buying a detached house so there was no chance of neighbourly sounds through a dividing wall. And it wasn't long into the marriage before she decided she couldn't have children. She made it seem as if it was a medical problem, even pretended to visit the hospital a couple of times to throw Alan off the scent. No, the real reason was the noise that babies made. All that screaming.

'Anyway, we're best on own, love,' she'd said to Alan. He had gone along with it, though there were occasions afterwards when she caught him with a sad look on his face and knew what he was thinking.

They didn't need anyone else, she told herself, and that was true in the early days. They both enjoyed walking in the hills, even in the winter months when there was hardly anyone else around. That was the best time, when there were no kids shouting or dogs barking. Just the swish of the wind as they silently tramped for miles.

It was after Alan changed jobs that the trouble began. He'd been a gardener before then, mostly working on his own in public parks, quietly weeding and planting. But following his redundancy, the only decent job offer had been as a storeman in a warehouse. A great, noisy place, where everyone seemed to be constantly shouting. After her one and only visit there, she'd had a headache for days.

Meantime, she had taken so much time off work – with migraines caused by the mindless chatter of her colleagues, she was convinced – that she'd been fired by her employers. Anyway, she much preferred sitting at home with a good book. Luckily, their sympathetic family doctor backed her claim for long–term sickness benefits. Money was tight, but they had just enough to get by.

Until their bathroom sprung a leak, that is.

'How can we afford to have it repaired?' she'd wailed.

'It's OK,' Alan had said. 'There are self–help books on plumbing.' After quickly and cheaply fixing the problem, he said, 'That was easy.'

There was a look in his eyes she had never seen before.

'I'm going to make somewhere to put our books.'

And that was how it had started.

Now, listening to what was going on upstairs, she couldn't help wondering if he had been taking revenge on her for their lack of a family. The look in his eyes sometimes when he was banging particularly hard. Almost taunting her.

One thing for sure. It was the only reason she'd put up with the racket for so long, on one occasion biting her lip until it bled. The guilt she felt about her subterfuge. Sometimes she had even thought about saying, 'Sorry'.

But right now she would have given anything to apologise to Alan.

After putting up shelves around the house, he had turned his hand to bigger things, with money borrowed from the bank. Projects, he called them. Retiling the bathroom, then laying a patio in their tiny back garden. Most of the work had seemed utterly unnecessary to her. She insisted on him only working at weekends, but even then took herself off to the library or visited her mother when things got even mildly noisy. She suspected Alan wasn't even aware of her absence a lot of the time.

He had started to say he was too busy to go on walks with her. She went anyway, on her own, and told herself it was even better without him. It soon seemed as if they hardly ever saw each other. When he was in the middle of a project – which was most of the time – he spent hours in the various DIY stores around town.

On the rare occasions they found themselves in the same room, there appeared to be a permanent question hovering on his lips. She could guess what it was, after seeing the fuss he made over his young nephews when his sister came for a short stay. But since they hadn't married until their mid–thirties, she was now too old to have children. That's what I'll tell him if he asks, she decided. Somehow it eased her conscience.

And anyway they were sleeping in separate beds because of his snoring.

One day, just before their eighth wedding anniversary, he surprised her by saying, 'Shall we go out for a meal on Friday?'

'Um, yes, I suppose so.'

It felt very strange sitting in a restaurant with him on their first night out together for years. With Alan looking preoccupied, they hadn't talked much. But that only took her back to the early days of their relationship, their long, companionable silences.

'This is nice, isn't it?'

'Mmmm.'

An idea popped into her head: it's time we mended fences. How appropriate,

she thought, almost blurting out her little joke to Alan. Instead, gazing at him with a flash of her old tenderness, she'd said, 'What do you think about taking some time off? The two of us. A walking holiday in the Scottish Highlands. Away from everyone.'

He pulled a face, as if he had swallowed something nasty. She could see his hands trembling; and his voice, too, was shaky. 'I've been seeing someone else,' he said.

She hadn't raised her own voice, of course. It was something she very rarely did, and certainly never in public. Afterwards, she felt quite proud of her self–control.

'Who is she?'

He named a building suppliers not far from their house. 'She works there.'

'And what do you plan to do?'

'I'm leaving as soon as I finish the electrics in the kitchen.'

They were having to live with microwave cooking due to Alan's latest project. 'Should be done in a day or two.'

The silence between them for the rest of the evening had been less than companionable.

The next morning, while Alan was in work, she had gone to the building suppliers. The woman, younger than her, though far from pretty, was working behind the counter and chatting nineteen to the dozen to a customer. She'd gone up to her and said simply, 'I'm Alan's wife.'

That had shut the bitch up!

It was as if a volcano deep inside her had come to life after forty–three years of being dormant. Bile spewing to the surface. She barely recognised the strident voice as her own. 'You stay away from him, do you understand?'

She had even grabbed a Stanley knife from a display rack and waved it blindly for several seconds. Screaming now. 'He's mine!'

When Alan came home that evening, later than usual, she could tell from his shocked face that he'd been told what had happened. He hadn't seemed to know what to say. Back to normal, ashamed of herself, she herself could only get out the one word. 'Sorry.'

To her surprise, he'd only shrugged, before going up to his bedroom and shutting the door quietly.

The next morning, still regretting her loss of self–discipline, she had tried again as he was getting ready for work. 'I don't know what came over me.' Wanting to say much more, but instead busying herself with the toaster.

The look he'd given her had been unfathomable. But his voice was as soft as ever. 'Never mind. Too late, now.'

He'd phoned her from work later on. 'You must have guessed by now that she's dumped me. Said she could do without the hassle. Said the whole thing had been a mistake.'

He went into the kitchen with his tool bag as soon as he got home. 'Should be finished soon,' he'd called over his shoulder, before returning her stare as she watched from the door. 'Then I'm leaving you.'

'But ...'

It had been his turn to show rare anger. 'No buts!'

They hadn't exchanged another word before his death.

She'd gone back to the living room and sat in frozen silence. One of her migraines came on, soon made worse by the banging from the kitchen. Louder even than usual; and she imagined him lining her head up as a target for the hammer. Unable to face her mother, the library closed, she had gone for a long walk.

Not a sound but the rattle of their old grandfather clock when she got back to the house, and she knew at once that something was wrong. She found Alan lying on his back in in the kitchen, with a screwdriver fused to his blackened hand.

The coroner had given a stern lecture on the perils of amateur handymen tinkering with electricity. Only she had known the truth, the suicide note flushed down the toilet in the first horrified minutes after her discovery. The thought of all the fuss there would be, the questions and perhaps even accusations! No–one believed it was anything but an accident, of course, not even the woman from the building suppliers, who hadn't bothered coming to the funeral. As people offered sympathy, she could read their thoughts. Poor mousy little thing, she's going to be lost without him.

The truth was rather different. She'd mourned Alan for a time, naturally, but had come to realise that her new life offered its compensations. There were never any breadcrumbs on the worktops. The toothpaste remained squeezed at the correct end. When the evenings seemed long without him, she reminded herself that they'd sometimes gone for days without swapping more than a word or two.

What she certainly hadn't missed was the DIY racket.

Which made it all the worse now the noises had come back. Yes, she would go down on her knees if Alan came through the door at that moment.

'I'm sorry I shouted at her,' she would say. 'I'm sorry I ruined things for you.' In the hope he would forgive her and go away.

NOISE

Not that she ever *saw* her dead husband, except in her nightmares, which almost always involved the first few minutes after finding him on the kitchen floor. No, there was never a ghostly presence looking at her from a corner as she listened to the radio in the living room. Nor standing at the top of the stairs as she made her way to bed. Even when she started awake in the middle of the night, she could see nothing and no–one in the room with her.

But the noises would be there. They were muffled the first few times, as if he had the doors closed downstairs. The buzz of a drill, the percussion of hammer against nail. A hundred nails. Over and over again.

But they were steadily getting louder and she had begun to hear them even during the day. Sometimes from the kitchen, or perhaps the downstairs lavatory. It had crossed her mind that he was working his way through every room in the house. As she sat there now, staring sightlessly at her book, she could hear tapping sounds coming through the ceiling. She wondered how she would be able to go to bed that night.

When the tapping turned into full–blooded blows, as if something heavy was being hurled against the wall, she thrust her hands over her ears.

'I'M SORRY!' she screamed.

JE NE REGRETTE RIEN

It's been a shit twelve months. Living with myself. Living with what I did. Some people still think of me as a tough nut. Hard as nails. It's lucky they can't see inside my head. Because I'm a total mess these days.

I try not to think of Tommy. Don't want to be reminded. But you know how it is. Hard not to scratch an itch. The one good thing about what happened is that I now have fewer places to itch. Army humour.

I never had a best friend before Tommy. Bit of a lone wolf. Bit of a no–hoper as well. Crap at school and with youth unemployment at forty percent in our dump of a town. You work it out.

It was my old man who put the idea in my head when I began to mix with the wrong company. Already been had up in juvenile court for anti–social behaviour. He was probably hoping to see the back of me. 'It'll get you a trade,' he said. Well, his plan worked. The trade was killing.

Tommy was almost the first guy I met after arriving in camp. We went through basic training together. I think he was a loner like me up to that point. Perhaps that's why we became mates, it was us against the world.

Not that the world was a bad place in those days. Both me and Tommy took to soldiering like we'd been doing it all our lives. Route marches, weapon handling, we had a whale of a time. As we filled out with good grub, got a million times fitter, we, began to think we could take on anyone. It's what the army does. Makes you feel like a man.

It certainly felt good comparing myself to the weedy no–hopers I bumped into in the pub on my first home leave. After I knocked one of them out cold when he slagged off the forces, even the old man looked impressed.

Yeah, I was a hard nut alright. We were always getting into fights in the pubs and clubs around camp The trouble was I got too cocky. One time I tried to mix it with three guys on my own after a disagreement over football teams. They were tough bastards from a Jock outfit and I was getting a total hammering when Tommy came into the bar. He steamed in right away..

The switch in the odds must have calmed them down. Anyway, after a parting kick to my bollocks, they decided to call it a day. 'Thanks, mate,' I called out to Tommy, from where I was curled up on the ground.

He grinned. 'You'd do the same for me.'

We became more like brothers after that. Always together. It'll give you an idea of how close we were if I tell you that we even shared a girl for a short time. Kylie was her name, a big and bouncy shop assistant in town. Not that either of us got up to much with her. Snogging, a bit of a grope. Didn't fancy her enough, I suppose. Anyway, we were still kids.

JE NE REGRETTE RIEN

Before we kicked her into touch, Kylie used to ask these stupid questions.

'Won't you be scared? Do you sometimes wish you hadn't joined up?'

We laughed in her face and called her a stupid fat bitch behind her back. Tommy came from a better family than me. His old man worked in an office somewhere and his mother was even half–French. I remember him singing. '*Je ne regrette rien*' to fat Kylie. It means 'I don't regret anything'.

Wish I could say that now.

Then we finished basic training and got our first overseas posting. That means only one place for a squaddie with a rifle these days. Afghanistan. I remember wishing Kylie was around when the news came through, still annoyed at the stupid cow for thinking we might get scared.

It felt like walking into an oven as we got off the plane. We were hit by the pong of food and cow dung. Our sergeant, an old sweat on his third tour of duty, sniffed the air with pleasure. Taking the piss out of us first timers. 'Smell that, lads. Sweeter than a camel rider's armpit!'

But in spite of the heat and the smells and the millions of flies, we wouldn't have wanted to be any place else. In fact, the whole thing seemed like a game to start off with. Novelty value, I guess. It was even a bit of a lark bouncing around in a troop carrier that stank of piss and sweat.

Then we heard the sound of enemy gunfire for the first time and everyone began to calm down. Some of the lads were having second thoughts, you could tell, wishing they were back in Blighty. But not me and Tommy. We were gung–ho. We were itching to prove ourselves.

'Let me at those towel heads!' I shouted, before we set off on our first patrol.

'Towel heads are Arabs, thicko,' Tommy laughed, pushing me in the chest. He was the only one in the company allowed to give me even a friendly shove.

I pretended to punch him in the guts. 'Well, let me at them, anyway!'

Stupid, ignorant thicko that I was.

It wasn't long before we more than got our wish for a spot of action. A push by the Taliban meant a fire fight almost every time we put a foot outside our forward operating base. One of the lads stopped a bullet and another drove over a roadside bomb. But me and Tommy came through without a scratch.

I can't say the same for our minds. You grow up fast when some bastard is firing a mortar at you. We dropped the gung–ho crap and soon forgot any idea of going home with a gong. We didn't talk much about our feelings, so I never knew if Tommy was ever scared shitless. I know I was, especially the time I almost stopped one.

JE NE REGRETTE RIEN

We were on foot patrol after things had died down a bit, thankful the Taliban were taking a break. 'Wonder where they go on their hols?' one of our funny men joked. Everyone laughed, but we should have known better than to take the piss. An automatic weapon opened up on us as we were going down the main street of one of the small towns that were supposed to be under our control.

I was taking up the rear and froze when the popping noises started. The only excuse for my slowness to take cover was that I'd just come back to operations after a few days off with bad guts. As a bullet went close enough by for me to hear it, someone barged me behind the safety of a brick wall. It was Tommy.

Afterwards, back at base, I thanked him in the usual squaddie way. 'Fuck, you almost broke my nose when you shoved me against that wall. But cheers, man.'

Tommy tried to look modest and reminded me about the punch–up with the Jocks. 'Coming to your rescue is getting to be a habit,' he laughed. You may have gathered that I'm not one of life's deep thinkers, but the idea crossed my mind at that moment. Must be my turn next.

We were halfway through our tour of duty when we all began to perk up. Told each other we'd get through, no problem. It was like finding your second wind. That's the thing about being young. You soon get used to even the worst shit.

But the Taliban were also helping to cheer us up, taking themselves off to make hell for someone else. I remember when we hit one month to go. Me and Tommy were lying on our beds after another quiet patrol. Tommy looked brown and fit and tough. A real man. I felt the same way myself.

'Jesus, I'm glad I joined the army,' I said. 'How about you?'

Without missing a beat, he started to sing. '*Je ne regrette rien*.'

As one of the others started to grumble about foreign muck, I threatened to push his head through the wall.

But it didn't take long for my fighting qualities to be needed in a more official way. It was a shock to all our systems when the Taliban showed signs of stepping up their activity again. We got the message when a couple of mortar bombs were lobbed into the base.

With two weeks to go, I had my fingers and toes and everything else crossed. Even the thought of seeing my shithole of a home town again was beginning to seem like a good idea. I looked forward to strutting around in desert camouflage. Lock up your daughters.

Then we went out on our last foot patrol.

JE NE REGRETTE RIEN

Tommy was in front of me again. We were all feeling pretty down, one of the guys in the company having stepped on a mine only a couple of days before.

We were approaching the outskirts of a town when we came under fire from what seemed like several directions. I dived for cover behind a wall, before I heard a scream of pain over the popping of small arms. Even as a screech, I recognised the voice right away. Tommy.

I remember thinking, it's my turn. Looking around as the shooting got more intense, I saw that our patrol leader had been hit as well and was stretched out behind another wall. Not in any fit state to give orders. The rest of the lads had also gone to ground.

There was no way I wanted to stick my head above the parapet, let alone dash into a road that was being lashed with bullets. But Tommy screamed again. And that's when I did it. The thing I've had to live with for the past twelve months.

Ducking my head to make myself less of a target, I went out and grabbed hold of my friend.

Wow, you're thinking. A hero. Yeah, I've got a gong. Big deal.

Want to know the truth? I often wish I hadn't been brave on that baking hot afternoon in Helmand.

Because as I slung my mate to safety, I stepped on an IED at the roadside.

Tommy came to visit me in hospital. Though he'd been shot through both legs, his wounds were healing quickly. The wall had come between him and the blast of the IED.

'Sorry, mate,' he said.

Perhaps he felt guilty. Perhaps I was in the mood to make him feel guiilty. Anyway, he didn't stay long. I watched with envy as he limped out of the ward. Not having any legs of my own. A mess. A total wreck.

It was as he passed a glass partition, thinking I couldn't see him, that he gave the game away. The look on his face changing from concern to relief. I could read his mind at that moment – thank God that isn't me. He's tried to get in touch since, but it's better we never meet again. Don't want to give the game away myself.

Because I wish I could say it. I have no regrets. But I can't.

MONSTER

Murchison grimaced as he lifted the lid of the laptop.

'You OK?' the murderer's brother asked.

'Yeah, I'm fine.'

His finger was stretching towards the Power button when the voice turned frosty, even belligerent. 'I'd rather you didn't do that in here. I'd rather you just took it away.'

Leading the way to the front door, the man glanced at the slim object under Murchison's arm. 'I should have handed the bloody thing over to the police while I had the chance.'

There was genuine curiosity in Murchison's voice. 'Why didn't you?'

The man returned his stare. 'We were twins, did everything together. Or at least I thought we did. I still can't believe it. He wouldn't have hurt a fly.' Ignoring the scepticism on Murchison's face. 'Anyway, I gave him my word.'

He looked out, right and left, and then made a shooing motion with his hand. The street was deserted as Murchison scuttled to his car. An urgent whisper floated out of the darkness. 'You promise not to involve me in what you're doing?'

'I promise.'

He was about to start the engine when the man took a step towards the car. He was still whispering. 'You realise he might have been meaning to do this? All the time he was ...'

He broke off and went inside, but his last words seemed to linger in the chilly night air. Murchison wound up the window and glanced, a little uneasily, at the silver machine on his passenger seat. Yes, all the time ...

On the long drive home he remembered back to his first contact with Smallwood, the letter on prison stationery that had arrived out of the blue. Laying on the flattery with regard to his true crime writings. Offering him exclusive rights to the murderer's story.

He remembered back to his first visit to see Smallwood. The windowless room, the indifferent uniformed figure in one corner, the brown eyes watching him as he crossed to the shabby wooden table. But the man's voice was so pleasant, his manner so relaxed and cheery, that Murchison had wondered for an absurd moment about a possible miscarriage of justice. Even now, months later, having heard the awful truth at first hand, he still found it almost impossible to dislike Smallwood, let alone loathe him.

In fact, he had to keep reminding himself that the same bright smile must have helped to despatch twelve young women to their graves.

The deal had been a simple one. 'Agree to write my story and you get exclusive access to the stuff up here'. One slender finger tapping against his head.

After a pause, during which Murchison speculated if he really wanted to know what went on in *that* particular skull, he finally nodded. And so it had started.

There had been further face–to–face contacts since then, and many telephone conversations. But Smallwood also liked to write letters. A new one arrived every few days, a semi–literate scrawl on thin prison notepaper, revealing fresh details of his stomach–churning story. Ordinary family man to mass murderer. And yet Murchison often found himself smiling at the latest stupid joke – Knock, knock stuff – with which his correspondent always signed off.

At their last face–to–face, Smallwood had expressed satisfaction with progress to date. 'But I know you want to learn more about what drove me to it. The killing. This thing will give you a much better idea,' he'd said with one of his incongruously winning smiles.

'What's that?'

The smile turned mysterious. 'You'll see.'

The answer came when Murchison received a phone call, a conspiratorial voice he didn't recognise. 'I've just been let out,' the man said. 'Owen asked me to pass on a message. Didn't want to risk the screws listening in. Go and see his brother. He's got something to give you.' A muttered address in Birmingham, before the line went dead.

And now he was staring at the silver box in the quiet of his flat – much quieter now that Cheryl had gone – feeling suddenly reluctant to delve into its secrets. He knew that Smallwood had sent several messages to the police, the contents of which had never been made public, the official line being that their contents were too depraved for mass consumption. What other horrors might be lurking in the machine's electronic guts?

When he eventually started up the laptop, a quick search revealed the messages to the police. They proved to be as sickening as he had expected. Boastfully taunting, exuding malice and a vicious sense of superiority: '*You're too fucking stupid to catch me*.' Much worse was that each one contained details of Smallwood's most recent murder. Horrific details, of how this girl struggled and that girl suffered. He could see at once why they had never been released.

There were assorted other writings in the same folder – several manic and virtually unintelligible scribblings, a short essay that made only a little more sense, and even a couple of rudimentary poems. Each one, so far as he could tell, had the same topic at its heart. Blood lust. He wondered, again, at the chameleon powers of the seemingly mild–mannered figure in prison. The essay was headed '*WHY I KILL*', and incoherently pointed the finger at some mysterious outside agency. He

recalled the Yorkshire Ripper. Voices in the head. They always had to blame something.

Applying his normal research method, he read and re–read every disgusting word. One thing, however, was different from usual. Previously he had always been able, no matter how distasteful the crimes, to distance himself from his subject. Not this time, though. He had never felt so up close and personal with a mass murderer.

One reason for that, he supposed, was the laptop. He was touching the same keyboard as the killer, after all, looking at the same screen. Imagination had never been a strong point – it was why he wrote about true crime – but he couldn't keep pictures of Smallwood out of his mind. Hunched over the same plastic box. Giving vent to his ghastly fantasies. Smiling cheerily as he recounted his bloody deeds.

Murchison was also suffering from nightmares for almost the first time in his adult life; they were thick and murky, indecipherable, but he woke up more than once with a scream on his lips. The weirdness soon extended into his days. After the idea came to him that the laptop was almost as much a murder weapon as the man's hammer and cutting tools, his fingertips seemed to tingle every time he touched the keyboard. But he couldn't stay away from the folder, going over its contents again and again.

He first began to have concerns about his mental state when he caught himself reciting the man's frenzied bombast as he prepared his evening meal. The irony was that he was finding it difficult to continue with his own writing. The situation with Cheryl wasn't helping, he knew. And then, one day, he had the strangest sensation that he himself had come up with the filth he was staring at with such intensity. The feeling returned the next morning, this time so intense it was as if he was invoking an actual memory. A terrified face pleading for mercy. The tingle in his hands, for a second, turning into tangible pressure on a slender neck. He had to leave the flat and walk for hours in the rain to recover his composure.

After that, with the project at a standstill, he asked to see Smallwood

Having thought long and hard about his excuse, he tried to make a joke of it. 'To be honest, I feel burned out. Perhaps it's time for a change. Sci fi or a spot of historical fiction.'

Smallwood stared at him with amusement in his eyes. 'Nothing to do with the fact you've finally realised I'm a monster?'

His professional pride piqued, Murchison said, 'I've dealt with lots of people like you, Owen.'

'Not so up close and personal, though, eh?'

Now it was Murchison's turn to stare. Smallwood laughed. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

Bewildered, tired, with the odd feeling that he was about to cry, Murchison retorted, 'Perhaps I have. Twelve of them.'

There was a mischievous grin on the nondescript features. 'Not sleeping well?'

'Not really.'

Smallwood chuckled. 'I sleep like a baby these days.'

It occurred to Murchison that someone who didn't know them would at that moment have taken him for the banged–up mass murderer and Smallwood for the one who would soon be walking out of the prison free as a bird. Bring this to an end, he urged himself. Then stand up and leave. But first there was one question he had to ask, something that had been troubling him ever since the assignation in Birmingham.

'Did you always intend to have your story written like this. Is that why you kept the laptop?'

Smallwood's face turned from summer to mid–winter in an instant; staring into the ice–cold eyes, Murchison had no difficulty in imagining it was how his victims would have seen him in their death throes. And yet the voice was surprisingly small. 'It was more a case of me being kept.' He turned abruptly to the screw. 'I want to go back to my cell.'

At the door, Smallwood paused and turned. The smile was back in place, but changed somehow, rictus–like. Now his voice was mocking. 'Don't look so puzzled, Carl. You'll find out what I mean.'

Murchison cursed himself as he drove home. He still hadn't categorically washed his hands of Smallwood. At the same time, he was extremely reluctant to put himself on the receiving end of another of the man's gorgon stares. I'll write to tell him I'm off the case, he thought. In the meantime, he had a more pressing matter to deal with.

He'd been married to Cheryl for six years before she walked out on him. Three months ago and counting. She too was a writer, but an academic, a social historian. A specialist on family life in the age of the Empress Queen. He'd often thought she would have quite enjoyed being a Victorian herself. She still sometimes sent letters, for example, in preference to using email, and he had just received one of her exquisitely–crafted missives in the post that morning.

She'd accused him of being selfish, mean–spirited and obsessed with the macabre. It was all rubbish, of course, apart from perhaps the last accusation. And

the business with Smallwood was helping to rid him of even that particular failing.

Angry, frustrated, he hastened to draft a reply, and it wasn't until he was halfway through that the prickle in his fingers told him he was using Smallwood's laptop rather than his own. A moment of shock, followed by the peculiar feeling that he was doing the right thing. Somehow it seemed more appropriate for getting the bile out of his system.

Cheryl had moved in with a woman friend across town, one of a number of similarly–inclined males and females in her social circle, most of them fellow historians. He had always secretly thought of them as a bunch of intellectual snobs. One or two of them had been actively, maliciously patronising about his crime writing: 'Still wallowing in the gutter, Carl?' He was a peaceable soul – OK, a physical coward – but wished he hadn't been at that particular moment.

It was another of his beliefs that the same people were helping to ruin his marriage. He said so in his letter, immediately after asking Cheryl to return home: 'Don't let those so–called bastard friends of yours come between us.' Reading over the words, he wondered how Cheryl would take them. Anger flared in his guts. Sod her, he thought. But he finished off with 'PS, I love you'.

She rang him a couple of days later, her voice terse. 'I'm not coming back. I don't think I'm ever coming back.' A muffled noise in the background. Someone sniggering? As he started to shout, the line went dead.

Her friend barred the way when he went to see Cheryl, while her big, rugby–playing husband stood on watch in the hall. 'She's finally come to her senses,' the friend said. 'Seen you for what you really are, a small–minded little man who's scraping the bottom of the barrel with his books. If that letter is anything to go by.'

Murchison clenched his fists. 'You've always resented me, the lot of you. Fucking snobs. Laughing at me behind my back. To my face. The other day when Cheryl phoned. I heard you.'

She stared at him curiously. 'To be frank, I don't find anything about you in the least bit funny. Now go away.' Slamming the door in his face.

The next morning, hungover, exhausted, he considered his options. He could continue to try and win Cheryl back, though there seemed not much chance of that happening. Or he could give her what she wanted, presumably a divorce. He shook his head savagely. And then, from nowhere, a third alternative.

Or ... a shiver ran through him ... or he could hurt her.

Not like Smallwood would do it, though, he told himself. I'm not like him. An animal. A jovial and even charming animal, to be fair to the man. But an animal all the same. No, I'll use what I'm good at to get back at her. I'll use words.

He searched out the notepad with the email addresses. Months before – when he thought Cheryl still loved him – she had left her laptop running by mistake. For some reason, he'd gone into Hotmail and jotted down the addresses of several people who'd been among his chief tormentors. Now it was their turn to suffer. And, through them, Cheryl would also be made to feel some of his pain. He shivered again as he reached out for the laptop. It felt as if the idea had always been lurking in the back of his mind.

He decided to start with Simon Franks, the worst of the bastards.

The man was, naturally, a historian. Specialising in the Weimar Republic and the coming to power of Hitler. Something of a Nazi in his own right, with his prejudices against anyone who wasn't exactly like him, even some of his so–called friends. One time Murchison had overhead him talking to another of the snobs.

'Poor Cheryl. Married to someone who thinks he's a writer because he produces potboilers about serial killers, of all things. She deserves so much better.'

Now he wondered if there was more to the remark than met the eye. Was it Franks who had put the idea in Cheryl's head? Leave him, he's not worthy of you. His stomach churned – was something going on between them?

For all the arrogance he habitually showed towards other people, Franks was always smarming up to Cheryl; and he'd seen them giggling together in a corner at parties more than once. He hadn't felt any jealousy because of his firm belief that the man, with his foppish manner and drawling voice, was a closet gay. He really should have known better. After all, he'd written enough case studies of harmless–looking mass murderers to realise that no–one could be taken at face value.

He made the message short and sweet, pretending to be a discarded homosexual lover who was taking revenge on Franks. Writing had never been easier; as if his itchy fingertips were directly wired to his galloping brain. A mental picture of punching the man in the face mutated into a concluding obscenity: '*Simon fucks little boys.*' He was a little shocked when he read back the words, but it didn't stop him from pressing the Send button.

Cheryl phoned the next day. 'It was you, wasn't it?' she accused.

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'The awful email that's been sent to Simon's friends. Full of disgusting things about him.'

'What's that got to do with me?'

The hurt in her voice was palpable. 'Why are you doing this? And why are you bringing my friends into it?'

He made his voice sound reasonable. ‘I don’t even know their email addresses, so how could it have been me? Probably someone else in your little group. God knows, I’m not the only one Simon has hacked off.’

There was silence at the other end. Glad that she couldn’t see the grin on his face, he pretended innocent curiosity. ‘Incidentally, what did the email say?’ Bursting into laughter when the line went dead.

It was only later, as he nursed a stiff brandy, that he speculated on his new–found malevolence. Must have finally rubbed off on me, he thought, all these years of mixing with pathological liars and compulsive haters. A sudden picture in his head of mid–winter on Smallwood’s face.

Expecting an incensed and finger–pointing call from Franks, and quite looking forward to a confrontation, he was disappointed when the phone stayed silent. He decided it would be even better if the man came to the door. Aim for a certain place and kick hard, he told himself.

Not only mental cruelty but also physical recklessness – where has this new me come from? he wondered as he got into bed. But he had his best night’s sleep for a long time.

He started to stalk Cheryl the next day.

Following her to the library where she did a lot of her work – typically, she had a thing about researching on the internet – and around the shops. Watching from across the road as she went into restaurants with various female friends. But never Franks. Nor any other man, for that matter.

After a week of fruitless surveillance, he knew he was running out of steam. Even felt a little foolish. He questioned his vindictiveness. Why am I behaving like this? Let her go.

And then, on what he had decided would be his last day of snooping on her, she met up with Franks for lunch.

He felt sick with jealousy, peering through the plate glass as they nattered non–stop while they ate. At one point, Franks took Susan’s hand and Murchison imagined the man asking her to marry him. He had to restrain himself from storming into the place and hitting Franks. Without warning, Smallwood came into his head again. The cunning and patience required to kill twelve people! As the unsuspecting couple laughed, with their noses almost touching, his next thought frightened him.

I’ve only got the two.

He dreamed that night of Cheryl and Franks squirming against each other in

a shower of blood. He seemed to be arguing with someone: '*No, no, I won't do it.'* When he woke with a start, he could feel the tingle in his fingertips.

Cheryl rang the next morning. 'I want you to agree to a quickie divorce,' she said.

Since many of his killers had been divorced for unreasonable behaviour, Murchison was well aware of the rules. 'On what grounds exactly?' he asked. 'Spending too much time in the pub and not getting on with your friends doesn't cut it, Cheryl.'

She sounded weary. 'I know, Carl. And I'm sorry for what's happened, I truly am. But you have to understand that we're through. I'm never coming back to you. We're just too different.'

'On what grounds?' he repeated more loudly.

But he knew what was coming before she even spoke. 'I could admit to adultery.'

'Franks?'

'No–one, Carl. I just want a divorce.'

He could hear her crying at the other end. His brain felt as if it was about to explode. He wanted to reach through the telephone line and strangle her.

He remained angry, consumed by notions of revenge. The old wimpish Carl, he knew, would have given up at this point. Cheryl would have had her divorce. Not any longer, though. Somehow he was a different person – and again he wondered how the change had come about. The one thing he knew for sure was that everything had happened since his first meeting with Smallwood. Cheryl had left him the following week.

Having settled on his next step, he used rubber gloves as he he cut the words from magazines and newspapers. No point in risking another email; didn't want to make it easy for them to track him down. The old ways are often the best, he told himself. Amused by the thought that Cheryl would surely back him up on that one.

He consulted Smallwood's laptop as he arranged the cuttings on a plain sheet of paper. There had seemed no other way to draft the letter, his hands drawn towards the machine without any apparent prompting from his brain. Driven on by lurid visions of their writhing bodies, he had pounded the keyboard until his fingers hurt. Admirably concise, he thought, staring at the end result. The last sentence made him laugh all over again.

'*I'm coming to get you. You are going to die. Love and kisses*.'

After posting the letter from a distant part of London, he made strenuous efforts not to think about the next step. It's all just talk, he tried telling himself, nothing is going to happen. But he had taken to keeping the laptop on his bedside table so it was the last thing he saw at night, the first thing in the morning. The machine seemed to symbolise everything that had changed in him. Funny, but there were times when he felt like a machine himself, going about his life on autopilot, obsessed with thoughts of violent retribution.

It had become hard to tell whether the bodies twisted together in his nightmares were alive or dead. But he was no longer saying, '*I won't do it*.'

Cheryl phoned to say that she had reported the letter to the police. There was spite in her normally gentle voice. 'It's strange, Carl, but I never thought of Simon in that way. But what you've done has driven us together. Congrulations!'

The same friend confirmed Cheryl's assertions when he went around to her place. 'They've gone away for a break,' she said. 'They've become very close in the past weeks. And, oh, by the way, expect a very large policeman on your doorstep one of these days.' There was no rugby–playing bodyguard in the background his time, and he was pleased to see uncertainty, and even some fear, in her eyes when his face hardened. He had the urge to smash her in her own smug face as a substitute for his wife and Franks. But the admonition came from somewhere in his head: cunning and patience.

He tried to look a mixture of sad and resigned. 'Look, tell her that I'd never do something like that. I'll prove it if she gets in touch. I'll give her a divorce.'

Over my dead body, he thought as he walked away. Or yours.

The next days dragged by. Sometimes he couldn't tell if he was awake or dreaming, it all seemed the same. One morning, almost as if coming out of a trance, he found himself typing in Smallwood's laptop. The same uppercase words again and again. WHY I KILL. He snatched his hands away from the keyboard and then drank himself into a stupor.

No sort of policeman, large, small or medium, turned up at his door. Too busy chasing serial killers, he thought with a flash of his old sardonic wit. But most of the time he just wanted to scream with anger and frustration. There were occasions, though, when he felt like crying. Spasms of sorrow ripping through him. Whether for himself or for Cheryl or for what he was about to do, he wasn't sure.

His professional life had given him access to several career criminals; and it was in a pub in South London that he asked an aquaintance who knew about such matters to get hold of a gun for him. His contact, no doubt taking in the ravages of

drink and sleep deprivation, looked at him doubtfully. ‘Planning on topping someone, Carl?’

‘Just doing some research,’ Murchison soothed, glad the man was too busy thinking how much to charge him to dig any deeper.

When Cheryl rang, she sounded tense. ‘Do you mean it? It’s not another of your cruel games?’

‘Why don’t you come around here and we’ll talk about it. Bring Simon with you, just to show there’s no hard feelings.’

‘I’d rather we met somewhere public.’

The old Carl would have been offended by the tone of her voice. The new Carl, however, accepted that she was acting wisely. Not that it’s going to make any difference, he thought. A gun doesn’t care where it’s being used.

‘OK. How about next week?

‘I’ll let you know.’

Their bodies were fused together in his dreams that night and he was standing over them, staring down at the red–rimmed holes in their heads. Something was patting him on the back, something so terrifying he was too afraid to turn around and look. He woke with a squeal and saw Smallwood’s laptop glinting in a scrap of streetlight. He had the craziest idea it was staring back at him.

I’m not mad, he told himself over a very early breakfast of brandy and paracetamol. Please don’t let me be mad. He had stumbled into his clothes without looking again at the laptop. His mind turned to Smallwood for the first time in perhaps a week. What was it the man had said?

He arranged a visit on the pretext of resuming his case study. The same bare room, the same table, the same smiling monster. Very soon that’s going to make two of us, he thought. Except for the smiling perhaps. And yet we were both ordinary men, leading our separate lives, just scraping along, doing neither bad nor too much good. He remembered Smallwood’s mundane existence until the first of his killings.

Until ...

The one thing we have in common.

The laptop.

‘You don’t look well, Carl.’ There was a marked lack of surprise in the pleasant–sounding voice.

‘You knew I’d be back, didn’t you?’ Murchison accused.

‘I knew you’d be back. Looking for an answer. The only problem there isn’t one.’

A long silence, then Murchison forced out the words. ‘Where did you get the laptop?’

‘Oh, I just bought it. As you do. Second–hand off a man I met in a pub.’

Murchison stared at him. ‘Man in a pub? Who was he?’

‘Don’t know, never met him again. Come to think of it, he looked a bit like you. Haunted, you know.’

‘Sometimes ... sometimes I feel like it’s in charge of my thoughts.’

Smallwood’s laughed. ‘Yes. That’s it exactly.’

Realisation dawned on Murchison. ‘That’s why you’re so happy, isn’t it? You’re glad to be in here, aren’t you? Away from it.’

‘As I told you, I sleep like a baby. Bet you don’t, though.’ Then he turned to the prison officer, in the manner of someone tiring of a game. ‘Take me away. Or him.’

Murchison struggled to keep his voice the right side of hysteria. ‘Why did you do it, Owen? Involve me with that, that ... *thing*?’

Smallwood looked back at him from the door. His roguish grin had turned into something much darker and Murchison sensed a terrible writhing behind the brown eyes. ‘Plain and simple, Carl. I’m a monster.’

He winked. ‘You know why.’

I don’t feel like a monster, Murchison thought as he stared at the gun after Cheryl had phoned to firm up on their meeting the next day. And yet I’m going to shoot her anyway. Then the bastard. Then that bitch friend of hers.

His fingertips already tingling, he turned to the laptop on his desk. ‘Why are you doing this?’ he asked.

A gurgle that triggered a glow, a glower, on the LED screen that sat facing him. He saw dead bodies in a tangle of arms and legs, but couldn’t tell if the image was only in his head. Another gurgle that sounded like the spurting of blood. However, pleasure rather than horror had started to course through his own veins. His mood was becoming one of ferocious anticipation.

The sensation of the machine infiltrating even further, its alien voice talking inside him. *Write something*, he was told, *The other one always did. Before ...*

He fought back with what might have been the last vestiges of his sanity. I’m not a monster. Yet another rumble from the machine.

You have no choice. You have to kill.

He began to type. Got no further than a single line when he felt its grip tighten. Panicking, grabbing the gun and putting it to his head. Shouting ‘Fuck you!’ as he pressed the trigger.

MONSTER

The police used Cheryl's key to enter the flat. The cynical younger officer said, 'Silly bastard, and all over a woman.'

His senior colleague was only thankful that they'd got an open and shut case. He had some shopping to do, with his son's birthday coming up. Perhaps I'll buy him one of those, he speculated, staring at the laptop. The one half–finished sentence was just visible through a streak of gore.

'*Why I have to kill*' ...

SENSITIVE

Following his ignominious return from Rwanda, Jefferson had been given a gentle desk job in London. He had also been ordered by his Foreign Office masters to see a shrink, who finally pronounced him fit to return to full duties. That meant going abroad again. He wondered if it would be a wise move.

Remembering back to the warning wrinkle of his nose as he stepped off the plane at Kigali airport. The whiff of something unpleasant, a stench, that was submerged at first by a host of more agreeable sensations. The welcome offered him by the expatriate community. Late night parties in sweetly scented gardens. Weekends spent lazing around hotel pools.

It would have been a charmed life, in fact, except that the whiff returned, kept returning. Most often triggered by certain buildings in the city, ordinary–looking office blocks and factories that he sensed were cold inside even in the warmest weather. People appeared to be crossing the road to avoid them.

Even more disconcerting, perhaps, was a voice inside him that asked if it was right to be having fun in such a place. At one boisterous party, it muttered that they were dancing on the graves of the dead. Jefferson spent a sleepless night wondering why he, an innocent, should feel so guilty.

The whiff was getting worse. One day, as he passed an office block with dark stains down its walls, the smell was so thick and sweet that he almost retched. At an official function not long after, he brought up the horrors of the past with a Foreign Ministry aide. When he said that some of the buildings in Kigali gave him the creeps, the other man's cultured voice dropped to an assenting murmur.

'I understand that many places in this country are said to be haunted. Is it something you have seen?'

'Something I have smelled.'

The man touched his nose, as if to check it was still there. He was almost whispering by now. 'Did you know that, on their return, the liberators said the whole country reeked of blood?'

Jefferson jumped; because the whiff was suddenly in the room with them. He only got rid of it with the aid of several more whiskies. But the voice in his head later jeered at him, 'Murderer.'

After the whiff invaded his house, the Embassy for a time became his only refuge – until the day he caught its cloying odour in one of the air–conditioned corridors. The voice told him there was no escape. That night, with the stench still clogging his nostrils, he drove his car into a lamp–post. He staggered home unhurt, then proceeded to get even more drunk.

SENSITIVE

The next morning he threw up over his desk and burst into tears. His breakdown was attributed to the strain of overwork. A colleague who would be sorely missed, the ambassador told him in a private interview on the eve of his medical evacuation to London.

And now he had to go abroad again. When the name of his posting came through, it felt almost as if his bosses were testing him out. He debated long and hard with himself before agreeing to the move to Warsaw ...

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And now he was living on the second floor of a venerable apartment block in the centre of the Polish capital. Chatting to a fellow resident in its creaking elevator one day, he learned they were in one of the few structures to emerge virtually unscathed from the Uprising. They had both seen images of the shattered post–war metropolis and agreed that the building's survival was something of a miracle.

Living in the place at all often seemed like a miracle to Jefferson.

Because, at first, his senses had been on almost permanent alert. Listening out for the intruder in his head. Sniffing, always sniffing the air. Knowing that most of the inner city was mock–venerable, rebuilt since 1945, yet still reading pain on the stone facades. Troubled by buildings! But unable to forget the sullen–looking office blocks of Kigali. And further back in his past.

Over–sensitive, their family doctor had called him after he retreated home from Cambridge during his first term there. He had found everything about the place hostile and intimidating – the hothouse atmosphere, his fellow students, their acerbic tutors. Even the ancient architecture had seemed to menace rather than inspire him.

Almost frog–marched back to Cambridge by his father, he had soon made up for lost time; and kept himself busy in the next three years with friends and study and sport. Only the odd panic attack in all that time. The icing on the cake had been his degree in modern languages, good enough to get him into the Foreign Office.

And so to Warsaw – via Kigali. Determined to prove his recovery and yet anxious about their link as erstwhile centres of mass slaughter. Hence the watchful, wary first few weeks in his new home. But the weather had come to his rescue, a succession of foggy autumn days that smothered not only the cityscape but also, somehow, his tension. He began to relax.

SENSITIVE

Older and made careful by experience, Jefferson was now much less of a party animal, tending to stick to orange juice at social functions. Art galleries had become more his thing. It was at the opening of an exhibition that he first met Anna. Darkly pretty, she told him she was training to be a research chemist. He was agreeably surprised when she agreed to go with him to the cinema.

Their early dates were spent circling each other. Jefferson understood his own caution but wondered about the girl. It was only when they started laughing at the same things that they mutually let down their guard. Yet they continued to take it nice and slow, content to skate along the surface of their relationship.

His emotional radar, however, detected that Anna was holding something back. Her deflection of many of his more personal questions even made him speculate if she was hiding some not–very–nice secret from her past. That thought, oddly enough, was a comfort to him. They would be two damaged people together. One thing at least was good; they had sex after their fourth date.

Going forward in his personal affairs. Told by his boss that, in spite of Kigali, he would be back on the fast track to promotion if he kept up the good work. Above all, no whiff and no jeering voice inside him. Against the odds, he decided cautiously, it was turning into a charmed life.

He had been seeing Anna for several weeks when the first snowfall of winter arrived – and the transition to a new season seemed to signal a similar change in their relationship.

Anna had gone along with the idea that they should take their time, pace themselves, see how things went. But now her dark eyes were sending out a radically different message. She began to cling to him in bed. One evening, as they dined in a restaurant by candlelight, she said, ‘I love you.’

Though he assured her he felt the same way, it was a lie.

He soon began to invent reasons for not meeting her, most often saying he had to work late at the office. When they were together, he frequently felt ashamed about not being more honest. But somehow the words would never come. He pictured the look on her face as he made his confession. Better to let the relationship die a natural death, he decided. Less painful all round.

He could tell that Anna had guessed the truth. And yet they never spoke of it and she soon found her own excuses for skipping dates. Sometimes, though, he heard her crying in her sleep.

It was Anna who eventually, solemnly, suggested that they should separate for a little while in order to give themselves time to think. Ashamed of a flutter of

relief, Jefferson quickly adjusted his mood to correspond with hers. But there was no way he could match the tears in her eyes.

His conscience kept telling him to phone her in the weeks that followed, but it was Anna who eventually rang. After a minimum of catching up, she said, 'I think it is time to tell you why I am so shy about myself.'

'Your secret.'

Anna sounded only mildly surprised by his intuition. 'Yes, my secret. You are very, how you say, sensitive man, Thomas.'

Jefferson couldn't help remembering his own unspoken history. Make that over–sensitive, he mused.

Her next words caught him by surprise. 'Do you think I look Polish?'

Thinking of her dark eyes and even darker hair, he hesitated.

Her voice filled the void. 'At school I am much bullied. They call me *Pachnieć Żyd*.' He could hear her pain. 'It means Little Jew.'

A short pause and then: 'I want to know if you are like those bullies.'

Her meaning finally sank in. 'What?' he almost yelled.

'I wonder if that is why you no longer love me. Because you feel I am Jew.'

When Jefferson continued to protest, her voice grew soothing. 'It is OK. I believe you.'

Desperate now, he begged, 'Let me prove it. Come out with me again.'

'Not good idea, Thomas.' She sounded sad but also relieved. He had the impression a weight had been lifted from her mind. At the same time, it felt as if the burden had been passed to him.

After ringing and ringing Anna, he eventually went to her apartment and learned from her landlady that she had moved away. Somewhere abroad, the woman thought.

Jefferson hated himself for a while and the days passed slowly. But then came the music to divert his thoughts. He heard it most often as he sat reading after dinner; the faintest of mechanical tinkles, a confection from Chopin, the same few bars repeated. It never lasted more than a minute or two.

He was puzzled that the tune seemed to be coming from next door. His neighbour, apparently another bachelor, hardly ever seemed to be at home to judge from his usual lack of noise. A big and bluff businessman, he was also a highly unlikely user of a musical box. But when Jefferson bumped into him at the lift one morning, the man had two small girls with him. 'They are mine,' he laughed. 'Want break from mother.'

SENSITIVE

That evening, Jefferson smiled as the melody crept into his apartment. Not long after, however, a political crisis began to demand extra–long hours at work. Wanting to sleep now rather than read when he got home, Jefferson found the musical box more and more annoying. Woken by the jingle one night, he could have sworn it was getting louder.

The next night, when it sounded as if the thing was being pressed against his bedroom wall, Jefferson knew he had no choice but to act. He felt like a fool in his dressing gown but no–one came to the door in answer to his knock. In the morning he put his complaint to the old concierge. With a puzzled look, the man led the way to the second floor, where his skeleton key got them into the next–door apartment. Its emptiness hit Jefferson like a punch to the stomach.

'Man go home to wife, since two weeks.'

He drank himself into a stupor after work, hoping it would enable him to sleep. But the melody jerked him awake in the early hours, obtrusive enough to have been coming from his bedside table. It seemed to go on for ages. As he sat exhausted at his desk the next day, one fear was uppermost in his mind. He was in a bar later on, reluctant to go home, when it happened.

'It's all your fault,' said the voice.

With his work suffering, he was sent on gardening leave and booked himself into a hotel to avoid his apartment. That night he thought about Anna for the first time in weeks. He jerked awake with her face still in front of him, her eyes closed. The voice was accusing. 'You're a murderer,' it hissed.

A short time after, unshaven and hungover, he was called in to see the Ambassador. 'You realise we have no choice, Tom, but to send you home?' the man said.

The apartment was so silent as he shakily packed that he could hear the kitchen clock from his bedroom. Reassured, he went to take a last look at the busy street below.

Tum tara tum.

A gentle tinkle at first, but then a sudden acceleration in volume – up and up and up. Deafened, too shocked to move from the spot, finding it hard even to breathe, he forced open the window to get some air. He was leaning out when the voice joined in.

'OVER–SENSITIVE!' it roared.

His fall into the street broke several bones. The Embassy doctor, obviously believing that drink was the cause, said he was lucky not to have done much worse

damage to himself. He was medically evacuated to London once again, but this time on a stretcher.

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After quitting the Foreign Office, Jefferson lived for a time with his parents in the suburbs as he recovered from his injuries. But his mother's fussing soon got on his nerves. And he had another, much darker reason for wanting to get away from the city. So he rented a property in the country – making sure it was a new build – and lived there on his own. He rarely had friends to stay. There was no–one after Anna.

He restricted his visits to the nearby town, dashing in and out when he had no choice. Most days he went walking in the nearby forest; and a pervasive October drizzle ensured that he met scarcely another soul on his travels. Hearing only birdsong and the sound of the wind through the trees must have had a restorative effect. After a while, he could feel his defences going down a little.

When his increased confidence led to him trying out unfamiliar trails through the forest, he occasionally came across clearings that contained tumbledown woodcutter cottages from the previous century. Cautious at first, he soon began to stroll untroubled among the ruins. It always seemed like a small victory over his own past. Even the act of taking in deep draughts of moist autumn air felt as if he was fighting back.

He had been pleased that his nearest neighbour, another man living on his own, had shown similar signs of wanting to keep himself to himself. But now they began to exchange the occasional word when they met in the street. George was much older, in his late forties, and a widower.

One day Jefferson found he had run out of butter. Feeling too tired from his walk to drive into town, he decided to bite the bullet. George, far from being annoyed by the intrusion, shyly invited him in for a cup of tea. Jefferson noticed the photo on the mantleshelf right away.

He couldn't stop himself. 'She's pretty,' he said.

George looked proud. 'My daughter. She's in her last year at Cambridge.'

Jefferson could feel the start of tears in his eyes. 'I remember it well,' he murmured.

George said that Rachel would be staying with him over Christmas and even sounded enthusiastic about the two young people meeting.

'You've a lot in common. She loves the outdoors, too.'

A ridiculous plan came to Jefferson – we could live in the wilds of Canada, miles from anywhere. Worried for a moment that his craziness had returned, he reassured himself it was actually his way of getting back in touch with the real world. He wondered if it was significant that Rachel had blonde hair and blue eyes.

The next day turned out sunny – another good sign – and he went for a long ramble in the forest. A new trail brought him into a clearing that contained the remains of a cottage, its crumbling walls thickly covered with lichen.

And he immediately smelled the whiff again.

Then he ran.

That night, dizzy from the unaccustomed whisky, shocked to the core, he wondered what had happened in the forest all those years ago. A quarrel between husband and wife, culminating in physical assault and murder? His thoughts turned to George – a blood feud among neighbours?

He was on the edge, he knew, waiting to fall off. Waiting for the inevitable.

'There's only one way to put an end to this,' the voice finally hissed.

Jefferson drunkenly began his preparations. The opening sentence of his note sounded pompous even in his head. Where's that come from? he wondered. Surely not the same place as the voice? But he wrote it down anyway, before reading aloud from the computer screen.

'This is a last testament to my suffering.'

George found the suicide note. He also found Jefferson unconscious in his bedroom.

'You saved my life,' Jefferson said after his stomach was pumped, trying hard not to sound ungrateful.

'Well, I knew you were at home,' George said. 'It's just a feeling I had when you didn't come to the door – damn lucky that the kitchen window was open.'

'Lucky all round really,' Jefferson muttered.

George gave an awkward smile. 'You obviously weren't meant to die.'

In spite of his evident curiosity, George never asked about the meaning of his suicide note – and Jefferson had no intention of telling. However, he thought a lot about what the older man had said. And one bizarre but vaguely comforting notion kept recurring.

Two attempts, you bastard, and you haven't finished me off yet.

He was unable to work out who the bastard was.

And so, with the quiet and unquestioning support of his friend and neighbour, he muddled through the next few weeks. Determined not to curtail his walks in the forest but sticking to well–established routes.

Rachel joined him on many of his rambles after she returned home for Christmas. She was less pretty than her photo but still attractive in an understated way.

After a while, to his regret, Jefferson decided that she wasn't really his type. Rachel herself rammed home the message when, in answer to a teasing question about boyfriends, she laughed and said, 'No chance, I'm a girl's girl.'

Though he felt certain George hadn't told her about his suicide attempt, he realised that the daughter too was curious about him. He could almost read the words on her face at times. What are you doing, doing nothing in this backwater? Thinking back to the cottage in the forest, he sometimes asked himself a similar question. What is the point of staying in this place if the unbearable sense of past evils, and the voice, are able to go with me anywhere?

He had a more mundane reason to contemplate his future. His money, the cash pay–off from the Foreign Office, was beginning to run out. In an unguarded moment he mentioned this to Rachel and immediately detected relief on her face. She sees a chance to help me, he thought.

'Look, Tom, I belong to a charitable aid agency. I only help on a voluntary basis, of course, but they're always on the lookout for full–time professional staff. People like you, you know, with your sensitivity and language skills.'

That word again. He frowned. Rachel looked at him anxiously. 'Dad hasn't said anything, honest, but I know you've gone through bad times. I can see it in your eyes sometimes.'

'It's OK,' he soothed. 'You're right, I can't go on mouldering in this place. Have to face my demons at some point.'

Rachel didn't pry. Like father, like daughter, Jefferson reflected approvingly. Instead she became business–like in her gentle way. 'I know one of the head guys there, his son is a friend of mine at Cambridge. It's how I got into it. I'll give him a ring tomorrow, try to arrange for him to see you in London.'

Only a week later Jefferson met up with Arnold Wiseman in a pub off Trafalgar Square. On first seeing the stocky figure standing at the bar, carrying a copy of the Times newspaper as arranged, Anna popped into his mind as a shock, without warning. Must be the dark hair and eyes, he told himself.

They sat down with their drinks and Arnold laughed. 'I can tell you're thinking it's an unorthodox interviewing technique. But it works for me.' Jefferson liked him right away. For some unknown reason, he felt a connection between them.

They met twice more in the weeks that followed, each time in the same pub, and Jefferson understood that Arnold was gradually assessing him, but doing it with great good humour and tact. He wondered if Rachel had confided her thoughts about his troubled past.

Hesitantly, he began to open up and spoke about things he had told no–one else. Not his parents, not Anna, Not even the Foreign Office shrinks, for fear they would doubt his sanity. In spite of the difference in their ages, it felt as if he had been looking for someone like Arnold ever since Cambridge. A confidante. Someone who wouldn't judge him.

The first time he mentioned the voice he half expected Arnold to get up and walk out, writing him off as a bad job. But the older man leaned foward, a blaze of interest in his eyes. 'Tell me more,' he said.

Jefferson told him.

'It was the fall in Warsaw that first put the idea in my head,' he concluded. 'That it was out to get me.' He looked pleadingly at Arnold. 'I know what you're going to say, the voice is just part of *me*. But please don't think I'm crazy.'

'I would never think that.'

Jefferson sighed. 'Someone, a long time ago, called me over–sensitive. That is what I was and it's what I remain.' He felt driven to bleak humour. 'I'm even getting worse – it used to be whole cities but now a ruined cottage is enough.'

Arnold studied him. 'Have you ever thought about fighting back against this ... this whatever it is?'

He seemed to consider carefully before he went on. 'I don't want to sound harsh, Tom, and nor am I saying you should desensitise yourself, but perhaps it is a matter of not dwelling so much on your own feelings. After all, there's a whole world of suffering out there. And it's another brutal truth, I'm afraid, but you cannot help other people unless you are prepared to put your own troubles on the back burner.'

Jefferson looked down at his feet, feeling too wretched to speak. Arnold patted him on the arm. 'Courage, my friend. You've come a long way today. But the next few steps are crucial. I implore you, courage!'

Jefferson repeated the word as if it was something he had never come across before. 'Courage, yes.'

'Good. Your next step is a simple one, in fact, and something required of everyone we consider taking on.'

'We run a soup kitchen in the East End,' he continued. 'You'll help out there

for a while. It's nothing, of course, to the horrors you are likely to come across as one of our people working in a war zone, but it gives both you and us an idea of how you would cope when faced with people who are sometimes in the extremes of need.'

He stopped talking as if the arrangement was already a done deal and looked anxious for a moment. 'You prepared to give it a go?'

The East End, Jefferson thought. Jack the Ripper. He licked his lips nervously. 'Yes,' he said.

As they parted in the street, Arnold's normally bantering voice was almost belligerent. 'Perhaps the main thing I have learned in my fifty–three years is that bullies should never be allowed to win.' The sudden lack of focus in his eyes gave the impression he was thinking of another time and place, of someone else. He quickly walked away.

It felt to Jefferson as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He thought of Anna again, and then Arnold. The next time I hear the voice, he vowed, I'll tell the bloody thing to shut up.

Not long after, a voice was heard bellowing in a grimy street near to Whitechapel Underground station. 'Shup up, you bastard!' That night Jefferson slept better than he had for months. Years.

When he spoke to Arnold about the job offer, the older man chuckled down the phone. 'Great news, Tom. And the voice ... have you heard it lately?'

'Nothing but a whisper these days.'

It had been much on Jefferson's mind that he would eventually have to take the final step in testing himself. He could kill two birds with one stone, in fact, because there had to be someone who knew where Anna was. 'I'm even thinking of taking a short holiday in Warsaw.'

'That's great. Speaking of Warsaw, I never mentioned it but I had family there before the war. My parents luckily got out in time but a lot of our relatives died in the camps. My dad was always talking about his brother Samuel.'

A pause followed by a sigh. 'Uncle took poison with his wife rather than give the Nazis the pleasure of killing them.'

Another pause, and then the familiar faintly sardonic chuckle. 'It was a family legend that they found a musical box under the floorboards of their apartment after the war. Apparently it had been my auntie's favourite childhood toy. Inside the box was a suicide note from my uncle, something about it being a last testament to the suffering of his people.'

SENSITIVE

The telephone crashed from Jefferson's grasp and he had to clutch the edge of the table to remain on his feet. Over–sensitive, I'm just being over–sensitive, he told himself desperately. He fought against the voice building up to a scream inside him ...

KISS

Some people say you always remember your first kiss. I certainly remember mine.

This all happened half a lifetime ago. I was sixteen at the time, wet behind the ears even by the standards of the early seventies. Dad had been posted as a commercial secretary to the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur and mum had become a diplomatic lady of leisure. I was at boarding school but flew out to stay with them during the summer holidays.

After the greyness of things in England, KL came as a massive jolt to the senses: the sight of wild monkeys playing close to the main shopping area; the pungent aroma of spices in the night markets; the shrill calls of the street vendors. The humidity was so intense that I can recollect breaking out in a sweat just standing still long after the sun had gone down.

KL itself was more like a collection of villages – kampung – than a city in those days; and different parts of town were often separated by patches of secondary jungle. Tiny lizards ran across our walls and along our ceilings, and I woke one morning to find a giant praying mantis staring at me from the bedside table. The man in the house next–door had encountered a cobra in his kitchen. The word is over–used in travel brochures these days. But for a sixteen–year old whose only previous experience of abroad had consisted of camping in Brittany, that's exactly what it was.

Exotic.

And erotic.

It was almost as if every type of tempting female in Asia had been gathered together in the one place purely in order to drive a young man mad. Chattering, colourful flocks of them: willowy Indians and alluring Malays and bold–eyed Chinese. Many of mixed race seemed the most beautiful of them all. There were even several blondes, American and Australian and German, who sent shivers through me when I saw them at cocktail parties and other functions for the diplomatic corps.

It was at one of these parties not long after I arrived in KL that I got talking to a junior member of staff at the British High Commission. He didn't seem much older than me and introduced himself as Eric. As we chatted, he caught me gawping at a stunning Chinese girl in a red silk cheongsam. We were out on the lawn and the air seemed to be sucking at my skin even thought it was close to midnight.

We both stared in blatant admiration for a moment, before Eric laughed. 'It's the heat that does it,' he said. 'We're all going around at half cock most of the time.'

Being a well brought up public schoolboy I wasn't sure what he meant, but smiled to show my appreciation of his joke. The only way I was going to get a girl, I had already decided, was if I didn't behave like a know–nothing kid. It's not an easy act to pull off when a sea of ambiguities is raging through your teenage head. But that one thought shone out like a light. I was going to get a girl.

In time, I understood exactly what Eric was talking about. So blame the climate for what happened. Blame my runaway hormones.

My parents also seemed to like Eric and mum invited him to our bungalow for dinner the next night. Though he was a few years older than me, it turned out we were interested in a lot of the same things, especially rock music. There were other diplomatic brats around the High Commission at the time, most of them like me on holiday from the UK, and they tended to go around in a pack, getting drunk on the sly and generally making asses of themselves. I'm sure mum had the idea that Eric would be a calming influence on her only son and heir.

What our rapidly growing friendship provided, of course, was the perfect excuse for getting out of the house on my own. 'Eric is picking me up,' I would say during our evening meal. 'We're going back to his place. He bought some new LPs the other day.'

Which meant that between eight and midnight or so – they were pretty liberal in that respect – my parents had abolutely no idea what I was getting up to. It didn't seem to bother them. After all, I was in good hands.

Silly mum and dad.

Because Eric very quickly introduced me to the charms of the ganja which could be purchased on street corners just about anywhere in KL. We each had our own brass pipe and took it in turns to use his headphones. It's one of the blasts from my past: puffing on freshly crushed weed while sending the Velvet Underground through the sound barrier.

My other main interest in life raised its ugly head.

'Where can we find girls?'

It turned out that my mentor could provide even in that respect. 'Oh, there are bars where you can meet them.'

I was anxious. 'Will they want to go out with a kid like me?'

Eric gave a tight smile. 'Don't worry about that – just make sure you bring your pocket money with you.'

I pestered him until he finally agreed to take me into town, and what followed was my first experience of the seedier side of night life in KL. I loved every minute. It made me feel that my dreams were about to come true.

Not that we did much. In retrospect, and by today's standards, our behaviour could even be described as innocent. We spent a lot of time in the same bar watching the activities going on all around us. Even as a sixteen–year old virgin, I quickly grasped that the various manouvres were almost entirely of a commercial nature. Shrieking girls in short skirts were everywhere, busily cajoling men into buying drinks for them. Couples were forever disappearing upstairs or leaving together after cash had been passed to the fat madame, or mamasan, who presided over the establishment.

The odd thing was that the women mostly ignored the two of us. At first Eric blamed me. 'The trouble is you look about twelve.'

Then he admitted that he had turned down approaches in the past, on nights out with other High Commission types, and the girls now thought he just wanted to look. The problem wasn't shyness, he explained, but the fact that he had a girlfriend in the UK and didn't want to be unfaithful to her.

So what with my lack of funds and Eric's reluctance to expose himself to temptation, it seemed very much like my first visit to Sodom and Gomorrah was also going to be my last.

But I was determined not to be beaten.

The first task I set myself was to get my hands on some cash. Having been given a rough idea by Eric of how much it would cost, I explained to mum that I was thinking of joining a band and needed to buy a guitar. A reminder that I was her only son and heir eventually had her reaching for her purse. 'Don't tell your father, mind, or he'll stop it from your allowance.'

Eric had an old guitar that I could pass off as something I'd bought, but I wanted much more from him than that. 'Please, Eric, come with me. I can't go on my own,' I begged.

'If Ruth found out, she'd kill me. Sorry.'

But only a week later his girlfriend dumped him for someone else. Vicious little bastard that I was, I thanked her from the bottom of my heart when poor distraught Eric suggested a trip into town to drown his sorrows.

We went to the same girly bar. The fat mamasan behind the counter sneered when she saw us come through the swing doors, no doubt having already written us off as a couple of no–hopers. I'll show you, I thought grimly.

A colleague of Eric's from the High Commission, a red–faced and big–bellied individual, was sitting on his own at one of the tables. Thinking he must be a regular, and had probably tried every girl in the room, I did my discreet best to find out if he had any recommendations. He saw through me right away, of course, and gave a cynical smirk.

‘Stay away, son, until you learn how to change your own nappies.’

Ignoring my schoolboy glare, he scanned the various couples fumbling with each other. ‘Never know what you’re gonna find in this place.’ He touched one porky finger to his deeply veined nose and winked. Not long after, he staggered off into the night.

‘What was that about staying away?’ I asked, suddenly a little less certain of my mission.

Eric, with copious amounts of Black Label in his belly, giggled and waved a floppy hand around the room. ‘Some of the women here have got the clap. But tonight I don’t give a toss!’

‘Clap?’

‘Yes, clap. It’s a disease. Of the goolies.’

Only half certain of what he was saying, I gave one of my worldly–wise smiles. But I didn’t like the sound of it. Goolies. I wondered which of them had the clap. All at once they appeared a lot less attractive.

But that was before I saw the woman of my fevered dreams.

What made me notice her in the first place, I suppose, was that she looked the way I felt. Young and inexperienced. Most of the girls were going about their work with a loud and brazen confidence. However, my girl – I thought of her as that right away – was standing in a corner of the room with an uncertain smile on her pretty face. In fact, she seemed even less sure of what to do next than me.

I soon realised that one or two of the other bar girls were also paying attention to her. Only of a less admiring variety. Bitch, I thought when a much older woman barged into her with a scowl. I turned to Eric for encouragement.

‘I think I might go and talk to that girl over there.’

It was obvious that I could have announced I was flying to the moon for all Eric cared. He looked more than half asleep, with his head lolling to one side and drool coming from a corner of his mouth. I stood up, feeling guilty about leaving him in such a state. But by that time my hormones, fuelled by alcohol, were strictly in control.

While I pushed my way through the crowd, her luminous black eyes kept glancing over my face. I felt sure I could read the solution to my problem in their depths. I only had the one problem.

Though she looked as nervous as me, her shyness made me feel better. I was an innocent, a virgin. I badly wanted her to be something similar. I wanted her to tell me it was her first week, her first day, in the job. I told myself she didn’t look as hard–faced as the other women in the bar.

KISS

When we finally came face to face, my girl smiled and said, ‘Hi.’ Her voice was soft but smoky.

I managed to get out the same short greeting in a drunken slur.

It suddenly felt as if I was a stranger in several strange lands. She seemed foreign in so many ways. Chinese–Malaysian. A bar girl. Above all, a girl who acted as if she might even want to be with me. The last time that had happened was at a seventh birthday party.

My girl looked around, as if she was trying to take a cue from her more knowledgeable colleagues. An ugly Indian woman with dyed red hair practically snarled at her. Finally she spoke again. ‘You buy me drink?’ she asked.

After struggling to the bar, I ordered a Tiger beer and something expensive pretending to be alcohol for her. The mamasan was still regarding me with contempt. I pushed my way back to where my girl was standing close to the swing doors, as if she was reluctant to come any further into the room. We sipped our drinks while I slyly studied her face and body. She had nicely shaped lips and long black hair framing the dark eyes. A bit on the skinny side, I decided, but I still fancied her.

My girl finally broke the silence. ‘You want sexy time?’ she asked. But there was an endearing note of anxiety in her voice and I got the impression she half expected me to walk off.

I started to jabber like an idiot. ‘Yes, yes. I mean ... well, yes.’

She hesitantly named a price that seemed very reasonable given that I was quite prepared to hand over the entire contents of my wallet on the spot.

Our transaction concluded, she suddenly appeared to be in a hurry to get away. ‘First I go toilet. You come in two minutes,’ she said.

As she made her way through the crush to the back exit, head shyly down, I noticed some of the other women glaring at her. I told myself they were jealous because she was young and innocent. And, most importantly, she was going to turn me into a man. I felt like an explorer who was about to lay his hands on an unknown species.

I looked over to Eric and was pleased to see that he had woken up and was attempting to bury his head in someone’s cleavage. Then I commenced my drunken countdown; and perhaps sixty seconds had passed before the lightning bolt struck. She’s walked off with my money. I cursed myself for being a stupid, gullible kid. The words came back with dreadful clarity: ‘Stay away, son, until you learn how to change your own nappies.’

As I barged through the crowded room, a bedraggled Brit shouted something after me. It could have been, ‘You bloody fool.’

KISS

The outside toilet block gave off a stench of piss and shit in the humid night air. A shrill voice was shrieking from inside the building, and my girl's lower pitched tones answered back. A last strident volley in Chinese, before the door was flung open and a youthful but grasping face appeared in the slanting yellow light. Seeing me in the shadows, she sneered and called something back over her shoulder.

When my girl emerged, looking embarrassed, relief as well as sweat suddenly poured from me. The other woman started to say something, but she grabbed my hand and dragged me down a seedy side alley away from the bar. We were both breathless and giggling by the time we got back to the main strip; and there was a roaring in my ears that had nothing to do with the streams of traffic going past. As we stared at each other in the neon glare, she seemed as excited as me. We grabbed each other and kissed.

My first romantic kiss.

I can remember it after more than thirty years.

Because it sobered me in an instant. I was not–so–sweet sixteen and continued to be unkissed. By a female, anyway. Because the sinewy body I was clutching on that noisy South East Asian street, the rising passion I could feel pressed against me, immediately made it clear that the whole thing was a bad mistake.

My recent acquaintance stared after me as I stumbled off to find a taxi to get me to safety. One thought kept drumming through my callous teenage head. Women are still an unknown species, women are still an unknown species ...

PHONE AND I'LL COME TO YOU

Given what followed, Kevin thought later, it was only appropriate that the lanky male figure had been a blur in the corner of his eye on the packed Central Line train. But he had the feeling of being watched throughout the journey. Kevin bumped against the man as he fought his way through the crowd to get to the platform at his stop, and not long after realised that his mobile phone had gone from his jacket pocket.

As he told Dougie in their local, The Bricklayer's Arms, that evening. 'How can I afford a new phone? I still owe money on the one that's been nicked. Christ Almighty ...'

His friend winked and touched his nose. The gesture was meant to remind Kevin that he was in the company of a wheeler and dealer. The flashing pound signs in Dougie's eyes would have been more than enough. 'No probs. I have just the thing. Twenty quid since you're a pal.'

Dougie worked in the local market, mostly flogging dodgy gear from a suitcase. It was his proud boast that he could lay his hands on just about any kind of electronic gadgetry – hi–fis, Wii, mobile phones. They'd known each other for fourteen of their twenty years, and were still good friends in spite of having almost diametrically opposed personalities. Dougie loved ducking and diving, while Kevin wanted security and a quiet life. Which was why he worked as a trainee bank official. No, make that a very broke trainee bank official.

But he couldn't help wishing, sometimes, that he was more like his mate. That feeling had never been stronger as Dougie pulled out a wad of notes to pay for another round of drinks, before turning back to him. Then he took something from his flashy leather jacket. 'I'm practically giving it away.'

Kevin stared dubiously at the tiny black instrument. 'I suppose it's come off the back of a lorry?'

'No chance, Kev. I give you my word.'

There was a look on his friend's face that Kevin couldn't read. 'You usually lie better than that,' he said. But then he thought, beggars can't be choosers. His sense of caution, however, demanded further reassurance.

'You sure?'

'Sure I'm sure. It's been activated and everything. Ready to go.'

As Kevin continued to hesitate, Dougie shrugged his shoulders. 'Your loss, mate.'

'OK, I'll take it.'

'You know it makes sense.'

'I'll have to owe you until I get paid, though.'

'No probs, Kev.'

PHONE AND I'LL COME TO YOU

Kevin had a dual purpose in phoning Ellen from the pub. One was to make sure that his new acquisition actually worked; the other was because he badly wanted to speak to her. He cursed, yet again, the day she had joined the army. Fancy being stuck in the bloody wilds of Yorkshire! She was one of the main reasons why he had to have his own phone. The landline at home was too embarrassing, with his mum listening out for every word. And they weren't allowed private calls from the office.

The phone proved to be a lot more satisfactory than their brief conversation. Ellen sounded strained and said she couldn't speak for long because her battalion was getting ready for a training exercise in Scotland. The distance between them – in every sense – seemed to be getting wider and wider. He'd been tempted to ask if she had met someone else.

Dougie was trying to flog a 'Rolex' watch to someone when Kevin left the pub. As he walked the mile or so back to the house, he found it impossible to keep visions of Ellen out of his head. First she was in bed with one hunk in uniform, then two, then a whole platoon. It must have been his deepening gloom that made him feel jumpy enough to turn and peer back into the darkness more than once. But there was never anyone behind him.

His temper hadn't been improved by Ellen's disclosure that she was going away on manouvres. For at least two weeks, she'd said. One way to keep me from ringing again, he thought. Every possible interpretation of the word 'manouvres' ran through his head. Very few of them were reassuring.

He switched the phone off, determined not to be the first to get back in touch, and spent the next two days in a state of almost trappist silence. His lack of communication made his mother worry that his sinus problems had returned. His father called him a moody little git.

But he couldn't maintain his vow. When he eventually managed to get through to the base, one of her female colleagues told him that his girlfriend wasn't there. 'Away on manouvres?' Kevin said, trying to keep any hint of sarcasm out of his voice.

Her reply wasn't exactly reassuring. 'Um, I think so.' Kevin had a mental picture of Ellen standing close by with a finger to her lips.

He tried again later in the day, after leaving the office. This time a gruff male voice told him that Ellen couldn't be contacted. 'Manouvres,' it said, without any attempt to sound convincing. Kevin almost threw the mobile to the pavement in his frustration.

The rest of the evening was spent drowning his sorrows with money borrowed off his mother behind his father's back. As he staggered along a series of

almost deserted streets after being kicked out of The Bricklayer's Arms at midnight, the sensation of being followed didn't register at first. Looking around, he made out someone in the distance, who seemed to be going the same way as him. Another late–night boozer making his way home, Kevin concluded. But it struck him as a little strange that the other person never seemed to get any nearer, even after he stopped to relieve himself against a wall.

Taking a last glance over his shoulder as he entered the house, he thought he saw a shadowy figure standing motionless at the end of their road. After eating the supper left by his mother, Kevin decided it was only drink and depression turning him paranoid.

The weather the next day didn't help his mood, a surly sky seeming to drain the colour out of everything. After struggling with his hangover until early afternoon, he told his boss he wasn't feeling well. An hour later, with his overdraft increased by thirty pounds for a further night of forgetting, he was sitting in The Bricklayer's Arms over a pint. As he was thinking up ways of getting back at Ellen – none of them even remotely feasible – Dougie came into the pub.

'How's the phone?' he asked.

'Brought me nothing but bad luck.'

Dougie stared at him. 'What d'you mean?' There was truculence in his voice, but also something more evasive. When a word came to Kevin, he wondered if the drink was screwing with his brain. Dougie didn't do shame.

As he explained about Ellen, Dougie made all the right noises – 'That's shit, that is. Forget about her, mate.' – but Kevin sensed more relief than sympathy in his voice.

A glance at the 'Rolex' on his wrist. 'Sorry, Kev. Things to do, people to see.' Watching him scurry off, Kevin decided that his friend had been worried that he was going to ask for his money back.

He changed his mind about making a night of it. There was the fear of losing his job but also another notion lurking in his head. He grew angry with himself: too much booze was definitely making him stupid. Yet the thought wouldn't go away. Go home before it gets dark.

The light outside had grown even more subdued, and Kevin's private gloom seemed to be mirrored on nearly every face in the busy shopping street. As soon as he started walking, he had the sensation of being followed. A glance over his shoulder told him that dozens of people were going the same way. But then one figure in particular caught his eye.

The man gave every sign of sprinting hard, his arms and legs pumping, but was making little or no progress along the crowded pavement, and Kevin assumed

at first that he must be marking time for some reason. Bizarre, he thought. After walking on a little way, he felt compelled to turn his head once more. The man still appeared to be racing towards him and yet they were exactly the same distance apart.

It was the same the next time he looked back. And the time after that. The running figure was no nearer and no further away. Though Kevin's confusion was growing with every step he took, he felt certain of one thing. In spite of the man's face being a blur in the general murk, he somehow knew it was the same person who had followed him the night before. Only a lot closer now, perhaps a hundred yards behind him.

Unnerved, he increased his own speed, determined not to turn around again, but couldn't resist a final backward glance as he hurried into their street. The chasing form was still a hundred yards away.

After scrambling through the front door, breathing heavily from the unaccustomed exertion, Kevin peeked out of their living room window. Visibility had deteriorated even further, a chalky fog suddenly enveloping everything, but he believed he could detect a dim shape across the road. He shivered at the thought of invisible eyes staring back at him.

Unable to sleep, he watched TV until three in the morning. Before drifting off, he considered peeking out to see if the shape was still there; and the same idea was in his head as soon as he woke to the dawn chorus. He waited another hour before cautiously pushing the curtains apart. The street was empty.

The only good thing, Kevin told himself as he sat wearily at his desk, is that I'm thinking less about Ellen. But what was going on? Who was following him? Why did it seem like something out of a bad dream?

He gave his girlfriend one more try from the mobile during his lunch break. Please speak to me, Ellen, please make me feel better. However, yet another voice told him that she wasn't available. He was already beginning to think of her as an ex–girlfriend.

The journey home on the Underground again made him feel as if he was somehow in a nightmare. He had visions of having to force his way through a congested train compartment with his pursuer not far behind. Why am I so afraid? he asked himself. But he already knew the answer. It came from a very dark place in his brain: because no man on earth could move in that strange running–on–the–spot way.

He wondered what he would do before the thing finally reached him. Some instinct told him that its face would be enough to make anyone scream.

But it wasn't until the short walk from the tube station that he felt the familiar prickle on the back of his neck. He had no option but to turn around. And now the figure was nearer still, perhaps fifty yards away, and he could make out what appeared to be a flapping cloak down to its knees. Again the impression that every effort was being made to catch up with him. Too afraid to raise his eyes to its face, he began to run, with the sick feeling that he was running for his life. A sideways glance as he fumbled with the front door told him that the figure was still rushing after him, still fifty yards behind.

His mother looked shocked when she emerged from the kitchen. 'Are you alright, Kevin?'

His father's voice drifted from the living room. 'What's he done now?'

No good talking to either of them, Kevin decided that night, too nervous to look out of his bedroom window, but certain that a cloaked figure was standing across the road. Perhaps even at their front door. He didn't get a lot of sleep.

And yet he had to confide in someone. He would literally go mad if he had to bottle it up any longer. And that was the operative word. Mad. Wouldn't any normal, sane person think he was round the bend when he told them? Even his best friend Chris. But his tired brain continued to shuffle names.

Then he recalled his own words. Brought me nothing but bad luck. He would talk to Dougie, who was a bit of a nutter himself.

After telling the office he was sick, he rang his friend. 'You going to be in the pub tonight? Can we have a quiet word?'

Dougie sounded guarded. 'Yeah, what about?'

'I'll tell you after.'

Luckily, his mother was going to her salsa class that evening and agreed to drop him off at The Bricklayer's Arms. He'd take a taxi back. In a moment of gallows humour, he wondered how he would get about on the remaining twenty odd thousand days of his life.

Dougie, busy selling some dodgy gear, reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled to one side in the pub. Kevin made sure they sat at a corner table, well away from anyone he knew. He had decided in the car not to mess about – if I say it quickly, it might even make some sort of sense.

'He took the chunk of plastic out of his pocket and placed it on the table. 'You remember I joked about having bad luck? Well, I didn't only mean Ellen.'

Dougie looked sullenly at the phone.

'I have been scared shitless the last couple of days,' Kevin went on, before making a weak attempt at a joke. 'Ever since you flogged me that.'

Dougie's scowl grew blacker and Kevin saw him edge his hand away from the tiny instrument. Then he had two startling thoughts in quick succession.

Dougie knows something!

It's to do with the mobile.

He took a deep breath before going on. 'Look, Dougie. Something very strange is happening to me.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Someone, no, some *thing* has been running after me. It's seems to be getting closer every time I see it. I haven't the foggiest what's going to happen when it catches up with me. Nothing good, though.'

They stared at each other, and Kevin half–expected his friend to stand up and shout out to the whole pub to listen to the bleedin' nutter. Instead Dougie gave an unconvincing laugh. 'Christ, Kev, stop winding me up.' But his eyes grew wide when they flickered to the mobile and back.

Kevin was struggling to hold his temper. 'You know something, don't you? Something about the phone.'

Dougie's mumble carried even less conviction. 'No, mate, honest.'

Fighting the urge to pummel the truth out of his friend, Kevin spoke as steadily as he could manage. 'Go on, tell me about it.' Then all his suppressed emotions surged into the open, causing heads to turn in their direction.

'*PLEASE!'*

There might even have been a hint of guilt in his friend's sheepish expression. 'Promise you won't kill me?'

His own face twitching from fear and lack of sleep, Kevin said, 'I promise.'

Dougie's tongue darted out and licked his bottom lip. 'Well, see, I found it.'

'Found it?'

A lame interpretation of the familiar Cockney wideboy shrug. 'OK, OK. So I nicked the bleedin' thing.'

'Jesus!' An idea in his head that seemed no more crazy than the other things that were happening to him. His voice rose wildly. 'Am I being punished for something you fucking did?'

Dougie hunched in his seat as people again stared at them. For perhaps the first time since junior school, he seemed lost for words.

'What is it? What's happening to me?'

After nervously drumming his fingers on the table for several seconds, Dougie said, 'It happened about a week ago. I was in Hornchurch, you know, doing a bit of business. And I saw this guy running. Like he was being chased.'

The question had been on Kevin's mind a lot. 'And could you see anyone behind him?' he asked, wondering if he was ready for Dougie's answer.

'Not a thing.'

The last word brought an expulsion of breath that was more like a sob from Kevin. 'So what happened?' he asked softly.

'He ran out into the road, you know, like he didn't give a toss.' Dougie's words were almost too low to catch. 'It was like ... like he wanted to die.'

Neither of them seemed willing to trust his voice any longer, until Dougie finally managed to croak, 'Anyway, a van got him.'

Up to this point, he had been looking everywhere but at Kevin. But now he was staring into his eyes. The voice was still a croak. A disbelieving croak. 'It was the exact same as you said.'

Another long pause.

'What did I say, Dougie?'

'The guy looked scared shitless.'

Now it was Kevin's turn. 'This isn't one of your wind–ups, is it?' But the strain on his friend's face was answer enough.

When Dougie took a gulp of stale pub air, apparently psyching himself up to go on, Kevin had a flash of intuition. 'You stole the phone from a dead man. Didn't you? *Didn't you?*'

'He wasn't dead. Not then, anyhow,' Dougie muttered, as if it was important to make the distinction. 'I sort of slipped it into my pocket, you know, to keep it safe. Forgot about it until later.'

'Until you sold it to me, you mean?'

Dougie flushed. 'Yeah, I suppose.'

Kevin had another moment of wanting to smash him in the face, but finally said, 'So you don't think this is just me being weird?'

'Fuck, no. The look on the guy's face ... I can still see it now. You know, like he was being chased by the devil or something.'

'Yes, the devil,' Kevin whispered.

'Stop it, Kev, you're freaking me out.'

They were both staring at the mobile. 'Just leave it there,' Dougie suggested. 'You know this place, someone will nick it right away.'

Funny that, Kevin mused, it's how I got in this mess in the first place. He shook his head. 'No, because then that someone is going to have the same problem.'

'Who cares?'

'Can't do it. Wouldn't be able to live with myself.'

Another spasm of black humour. 'That is if I have any life left to live, of course.' He pulled at Dougie's sleeve. 'You got your car with you?'

A doubtful glance in return. 'Um, yeah.'

'We've got to dump the mobile in the Thames. Make sure no–one else uses it.'

'You asking to take it in my motor? What if the bleedin' thing starts following *me*?'

Kevin finally cracked, grabbing his startled friend by the throat. 'Who cares?' he hissed.

Letting go with a mumbled apology, he accused, 'You owe me.'

Dougie looked as if he wanted to be sick. He even sounded sick. 'OK. But cover it with something and keep it in your pocket.' As they were walking out of the pub: 'And sit in the back seat.'

After the deed was done, a still–complaining Dougie dropped him off at the house. And now it was past midnight and he was lying fully clothed on his bed. So far, so good, he told himself.

There had already been a couple of scares. His parents always went to sleep early during the week, which was why the footsteps on the stairs around eleven–thirty had alarmed him so much. Then he'd heard the door to the other bedroom close and remembered his mother sometimes went downstairs for a glass of milk during the night.

Not long after, he had heard a shuffling noise from the street just below his window. Cautiously peeping out, he'd caught sight of a bald head passing under the next street lamp, a shambling walk, and realised it was a neighbour returning home from one of his drinking sessions.

Is this how it's going to be from now on? Kevin wondered. To take his mind off things, he switched on the telly. He tried not to think about the morning and what might happen.

He tried not to think about the rest of his life.

MONKEY MAN

Kayley was at home when Stephen returned from his creative writing class. She had a sparkle in her eyes.

'Nice weekend?' he asked, thinking she must have copped off with a bloke on her trip back to Norwich to see her family.

She gave him a knowing look. 'Not the way you think.' She can read my mind, Stephen thought. Must come from us living together for so long.

'No,' Kayley went on. 'I've been helping mum to clear out my Uncle Oliver's house. She's had an eye on one or two pieces of his for ages.'

'Uncle Oliver?'

'Typical man,' Kayley complained with a smile. 'My mad uncle. I told you all about him, how he's just died.'

'Oh, yes,' Steven said, not really remembering. 'OK, so did you manage to pick up any pieces for yourself? The odd Ming vase?'

Now her smile had something mysterious about it. 'Just the one teeny weenie thing.'

'What?'

'I'll tell you when Cassie gets back.'

Stephen stared at her. It was a recurring joke between them that she could keep a secret for about thirty seconds. He was sure he saw temptation on her face. But then she seemed to make up her mind.

'I'll get us a cup of tea.'

As she did a couple of pirouettes on her way to the kitchen, it occurred to Stephen that in her scatty way she was possibly the most single–minded person he had ever come across. Immersed in an endless round of acting, singing and dancing lessons in her bid to become a stage or TV or movie star (she wasn't particular). Audition after audition, followed by disappointment after disappointment. Her main handicap was a lack of any real talent. Not that he was one to talk. Hoping to be the next Martin Amis without a shred of proof that he could so much as write out a shopping list.

Still, Cassandra helped to keep everyone grounded. She was their other flatmate and her only ambition seemed to involve having babies at some point in the future. In the meantime her maternal instincts were lavished on Kayley in particular. After answering their ad for a cool male to share, Steven had wondered at first if there was something going on between the two girls. He soon realised his mistake, however, when Kayley brought a guy home from a date and exercised her vocal chords in a different and very noisy way.

That was over two years ago and nothing much had changed in their lives. OK, he'd worked in several different bars. Big deal. Cassandra was an assistant in

a department store, the sort of job she'd done ever since coming to London. And Kayley, being Kayley, continued to live off the money lavished on her by her rich and doting father.

As soon as Cassandra got home, almost before she had taken off her coat, Kayley gathered everyone together in their tiny living room. If she gets any more pleased with herself, Stephen thought, she's going to explode.

'It's about my uncle Oliver.'

Cassandra frowned with motherly concern. 'Oh, the one who's just died?' Kayley gave Stephen a meaningful look.

She followed this up with a torrent of words, which concluded with the announcement that during the house clearance she had kept just one item for herself.

'Doesn't sound like you.' Stephen said, before dodging a cushion aimed at his head.

Ever the practical one, Cassandra asked, 'What is it?'

The mysterious smile was back on their flatmate's pretty face. Without another word – astonishing in itself – she went into her bedroom. She came back clutching a small brown object and held it out to them on her palm.

Cassandra, who didn't like mess or anything that looked like a mess, pulled a face. 'Ugh,' she said.

The thing resembled a lump of mummified meat, and the claw–like shape of it reminded Steve of something. But what? He covered his confusion with a joke. 'Looks like a turd.'

'What is it?' Cassandra repeated, suddenly sounding a lot less eager to know.

'No idea,' Kayley admitted. 'But I remember Uncle Oliver telling me a story about this when I was a small girl. I think it even gave me a nightmare. That's when mum made him stop telling me his silly stories. He was a great collector, my uncle. All sorts of weird stuff from his travels. He said he'd been around the world three times.'

Now, for a moment, she looked like a naughty schoolgirl. 'My mum would go mad if she knew I'd taken it. I think Uncle Oliver told her he'd thrown the thing away.'

Still the same blur of memory in the back of Stephen's mind. He tried willing it forward. Something about the object. A little shiver ran though him. Something bad.

Kayley, on the other hand, was smiling as if she had won the lottery. 'Anyway, never mind what it is. It's what my uncle said about it that counts.'

There was a rare moment of silence between the three of them.

'This thing,' Kayley went on, holding out the object, 'is going to make me famous. All you have to do is to hold it and wish.' She pointed in turn at her friends. 'And you. And you. One wish for each of us.'

Stephen could feel the memory taking shape as she talked. When it finally leapt out at him, he felt relief. Just a story, he thought. Nothing that had ever happened.

'The Monkey's Paw,' he murmured.

The other two looked puzzled. 'What?' Kayley asked.

'Oh, nothing.'

Cassandra brought an end to the strangeness in her usual down–to–earth way. 'Oh, sweetheart, you do talk nonsense sometimes. Anyway, dinner is not going to cook itself.' Though the girls were about the same age, she often sounded at least twenty years older. Stephen had sometimes wondered how Kayley felt about having two mums.

Cassandra's matter–of–factness had its usual calming affect and Kayley seemed much less chipper after the meal. 'It's impossible, of course,' she said regretfully, then stared at the thing in her hand. 'Or is it? Uncle sounded awful convinced that the story was genuine.'

A question came to Stephen. 'Did he ever use it to make a wish?'

'No. He said there was nothing he wanted badly enough. The wish had to be for something the person wanted almost more than life itself. Those were his exact words.'

No–one spoke for at least three seconds. This is getting to be a habit, Stephen thought. Finally Cassandra said, 'Sometimes I worry about you, sweeheart, I really do. Oh, that thing you like is on in a minute.'

Kayley sighed. 'I suppose you're right, it's all rubbish.' As if to emphasise the point, she dropped the object among the clutter on the mantleshelf: tennis balls and out–of–date wedding invitations, hideous ornaments brought back from foreign holidays, at least one non–working MP3 player.

'Must give this place a good spring clean,' Cassandra said, eyeing the jumble with disgust. They settled down in front of the TV and were soon engrossed in a reality show. The object wasn't mentioned again. But, more than once, Stephen caught Kayley looking at the mantleshelf.

That night he had a dream in which some creature was trying to scratch out his eyes. He woke in a sweat, vowing to chuck the thing down the rubbish chute behind Kayley's back. But in the morning he got up even later than usual and had a mad scramble to make the pub before opening time.

When he returned home, the girls were huddled in conversation and looked up as he entered the room. The animated look on Kayley's face for some reason made him feel uneasy.

'What's up?'

'Oh, nothing.'

After dinner, as they were watching television, Cassandra said, 'What was that about a monkey's paw?'

Stephen glanced over to the mantleshelf. The object was still there but he could see that it had been moved.

'It's a story.'

Kayley clapped her hands. 'Oooh, I *love* stories!'

'A horror story.'

'Oh, in that case don't bother!' she squealed.

But he could tell that Cassandra was struck by the seriousness that must have been showing on his face. 'Go on,' she said.

He explained that *The Monkey's Paw* was a famous short story written by W.W. Jacobs at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was about a strange visitor who turns up at a suburban villa with a tale of how the paw could grant one wish to three different people.

He stared at Kayley. 'Just like your uncle told you.'

'Go on,' Cassandra repeated, looking solemn.

'But a bad spell had been put on the paw. Nothing beneficial would come from the wishes. The idea was to show that anyone who interfered with fate did so to their regret.'

He had the urge to drive away Kayley's silly grin. 'To their very great regret.'

The girls eyed each other and burst out laughing. Then Cassandra grew contrite and tried to pull his head onto her ample breast. 'Sorry, Stevie, I just couldn't resist winding you up. You're so sweet when you're all serious.'

'Diddums,' Kayley said.

Even Stephen had joined in by this time. 'I know,' he chuckled. 'It's just a daft story. Couldn't possibly be true.'

'Just as well really,' Kayley giggled.

It took a second or two for the significance of her words to sink in. Stephen spoke very slowly. 'You what?'

'The stupid girl has already made a wish,' Cassandra said.

Kayley stood up and went into what was obviously meant to be a film star pose. 'Yes, to be famous all over the world.'

Shit, Stephen thought, feeling guilty. I should have got up earlier this morning.

Then he remembered a key element of the story. ‘Did it seem to move in your hand, you know, when you made the wish?’

‘Now you come to mention it, it did tingle a bit. Ooh, does that mean it’s going to come true?’

Stephen thought back again to the narrative and how the first wish had ended in a horrible death. ‘No,’ he muttered. ‘At least I hope not.’

His sudden mood of depression seemed to affect them all. Even Kayley went quiet. But Stephen could read excitement in her eyes when she glanced towards the mantleshelf. Just a daft story, he told himself. The silly girl is going to be very disappointed.

After a while, Cassandra said, ‘Come on, children. Time for bed.’

That night Stephen had a dream where someone had wished away everyone else on the planet and he was alone except for a stooped figure that seemed to be rushing towards him from a great distance away as he stood in the middle of a vast and empty plain. When he woke with a frightened moan, he almost went into the living room. But then the story ran through his head yet again. No, we have to keep it, he decided.

He was rushing again in the morning, and the girls were eating toast in the kitchen, when he overheard Kayley say, ‘Go on, Cass, do it.’

To his relief, their flatmate made a disparaging noise. ‘Yeah, right. Anyway, you heard what Stevie said, I’m waiting to see if anything bad happens to you.’

Their conspiratorial laughter was the last thing he heard as he pulled the front door shut.

He phoned Kayley’s mobile several times during the day and she always responded in her usual bubbly voice. In the end, though, she grew suspicious. ‘You’re checking up on me, aren’t you?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘I think you are,’ she chuckled. ‘Really. Steve, you must give up going to that writing class. Even Cass thinks it’s turning you funny.’

Stephen went along with her ribbing. But when he next rang, her phone was switched off.

His afternoon shift over, he returned to the flat. Neither girl was there and he studied the object with its tiny clawed fingers for what seemed like a long time. Arguing with himself. Keep it. Don’t keep it. He had taken a step forward to throw the thing down the chute when he heard the front door open. It was Cassandra.

'No Kayley?' she said, looking surprised. 'She told me she was coming home early because she's got a date tonight. You know, that dishy Greek guy she met.'

But Kayley never came home.

When they reported her missing to the police, they were interviewed by detectives who seemed to suspect that a serious crime had been committed. Since neither of them read the papers or paid much attention to the TV news, it came as a shock to learn that a possible serial killer was operating in London. Two girls had disappeared already.

They learned from Kayley's distraught father that the police were studying CCTV footage in the area where they believed his daughter had gone missing. Within days, the clip was a smash on YouTube. Grainy pictures of Kayley walking along the pavement in her distinctive yellow parka. An unmarked white van drawing up and obscuring her, then driving away. No more sign of Kayley. A white van had also been seen in the vicinity of the previous two abductions.

'Twenty million hits in just a few hours. She's become world–famous,' Cassandra murmured as they sat comforting each in other in their little living room. They both turned to stare at the mantleshelf.

Neither of them had stirred from the flat for days. Stephen had wanted to leave, to go back home and spend some recuperative time with his family. But Cassandra had insisted on staying. 'She might walk through that door at any moment. I would never forgive myself.' Stephen decided he couldn't leave her.

Cassandra asked about *The Monkey's Paw*, how the story had turned out. Stephen pretended he couldn't really remember, reluctant to go into detail because there was one part of the narrative that particularly bothered him. Don't go putting ideas in her head, he told himself. But when he suggested getting rid of the object, Cassandra wanted them to keep it, as if the thing was some sort of link to their missing friend. He agreed only after telling himself he was being foolish.

Unwilling to leave her on her own for long, Stephen rushed through the grocery shopping after they ran out of virtually everything and were reduced to eating stale bread. When he got back to the flat, Cassandra was running a feather duster over the mantleshelf. 'Thought I'd keep myself busy with some cleaning,' she said.

To his horror, she was holding the object in her other hand. She looked at him. 'You don't think it's just a coincidence, do you?'

'I – I don't know what you mean.'

'You think the wish caused her to to disappear.'

'Don't be stupid.'

Cassandra sighed, ‘Oh, I can’t think straight any more. Sometime I feel I’m going mad.’ Her voice grew heated. ‘Fancy thinking that something like this has changed our lives!’

To his relief, she seemed about to throw the object back among the clutter. Then she said, ‘Oh, Stevie, why can’t things be the way they were?’ Tears glistened on her plump cheeks. ‘I just want our little girl back!’

Then she screamed and threw the object to the floor.

With sickening foreknowledge, Stephen asked, ‘Jesus, Cass, what happened?’

‘It sort of jumped.’

They both watched the thing as if half expecting to see it move again. Finally, reluctantly, Stephen walked over and put the object back on the mantleshelf. His hand shook as he did so. Cassandra was staring at him.

‘Have I made a wish?’ she asked.

Stephen dropped his eyes. ‘I – I don’t know. Perhaps.’

‘Look at me!’ she hissed.

He could read extreme irritation on the normally mild–mannered face. ‘This is like that story, isn’t it?’

‘Sort of.’

‘You’d better tell me everything, Stevie.’ She took a step towards her laptop. ‘Or shall I just read it for myself on the internet?’

Stephen gabbled out the plot. How the son of the family had died in a horrible industrial accident after wishing for money for his family. How the wish had come true when his employer paid compensation to his parents. How, crazed with grief, the mother had made the father use the paw to ask for their child to come back to them.

‘Just like me,’ Cassandra murmured. A pause to consider. ‘And did he come back?’

‘Yes.’

A rising note in her voice. ‘So everything was OK then? A happy ending?’

Stephen tried to soften the words with a half–hearted smile. ‘Horror stories don’t usually have happy endings, Cass.’

‘So what happened?’

‘The father wished him away before the mother could open the door.’

‘Why did he do that?’

‘Jesus, Cass. Can’t you see? He’d been mangled in the accident. The father believed he would come back in that state. A monster.’

‘So that was the last wish?’

'Yes.'

She shuddered. 'Horrible!'

Stephen shook his head. 'I should have thrown the thing away before any of this happened.' He slumped onto the sofa with his head in his hands. 'It's all my fault.'

Cassandra sat down and pulled him to her. 'Don't be silly. It's just a story, Stevie. How were you to know?' Then she held him at arm's length, her voice shrill with barely suppressed fury. 'It *is* just a story. A very stupid one at that. And we're fools to think there's something to it. It must have been my nerves, you know, causing me to think the thing jumped. We're all pretty wound up at the moment.'

'Yes ... yes, you're probably right. Just a stupid story.'

The shrill of his mobile startled them. It was a friend's voice, sounding excited. 'Are you watching TV?'

The news story said that a body had been found in a field near Oxford, more than seventy miles from London. A tentative identification pointed to the first girl who had been abducted.

'Thank God,' Cassandra breathed, before the full horror hit home. Her face crumpled. 'Does that mean ...?'

It was Stephen's turn to sound fierce. 'It doesn't mean anything,' he said.

Stephen spent most of the next day fielding phone calls from friends and relatives about the gruesome discovery. More than one of them as good as put it into words that Kayley was dead. Darren, his boss, was torn between exasperation and sympathy by the constant interruptions and finally allowed him to finish his shift early. When he got home, Cassandra was already there, vigorously pushing a mop across the kitchen floor.

'I've been meaning to give this place a good clean for ages,' she said. 'The grease I found behind that stove. Ugh!'

She continued to chatter brightly as she prepared their evening meal. Kayley wasn't mentioned once. And yet her knuckles were white on the kitchen knife, Stephen noticed, and he again had the impression she was only just holding herself together.

Over dinner, during which she pecked at her food, she said that she would not be going into work for a bit. 'They've given me sort of compassionate leave.'

'Are you sure that's a good thing? I mean, sitting here on your own all day?'

He could tell that she was fighting not to raise her voice. 'What if she comes back here and there's no–one in. What's she going to think?' Then she lost the battle and the look on her face shocked him for a moment. 'Stupid man!'

She went to bed immediately after dinner, while Stephen sat with his thoughts in the living room. He looked at the mantleshelf more than once, but somehow couldn't bring himself to touch the thing.

In the morning, he felt obliged to go into work – his boss was not noted for his patience with staff and their rent was already over–due. Before he rushed off, he made Cassandra a cup of tea and took it into her bedroom. To his surprise, she seemed much more like her normal good–natured self.

'Thought I'd take full advantage of being a lady of leisure.'

Stephen tried to match her chirpiness. 'So what are you doing today?'

'Oh, I might do a bit more spring cleaning. We'll see.'

She looked apologetic. 'Sorry about losing my rag with you yesterday.'

'That's OK.'

As he was about to leave the room, she asked, 'So the parents never got to see their son after his death? The father wished him away before that could happen? So the boy might have looked alright?'

A prickle that he couldn't explain ran through Stephen. 'Er, I suppose so. Why do you ask?'

Cassandra smiled placidly. 'Oh, no particular reason. Hadn't you better get moving?'

He glanced at his watch. 'Oh, shit, is that the time?'

A couple of his colleagues talked him into staying behind for a drink at the end of their shift. With several whiskies in his belly, he agreed to go for a meal. 'Might help to take your mind off things,' one of them said.

He phoned Cassandra to ask if it was alright.

'No problem,' she said brightly. 'I'm still busy tidying up. I'm determined to shame that dirty stop–out into cleaning her room when she gets home.'

Stephen felt he ought to argue with her. Please, please, don't talk like that. It's not doing you any good. An alarm bell sounded woozily in his head. He made a move to rise, but one of his friends pushed him down by the shoulder. The other placed a drink in front of him. What the hell, Stephen thought, she's a grown woman. And a sensible one. As the warning noise faded, he drank up.

A cold rain was lancing out of the starless sky by the time he stumbled along their deserted street. It was past midnight. When he finally got the front door open, he was surprised to find Cassandra in the living room. To his even greater surprise, she too had obviously been drinking. Glancing over to the newly gleaming sideboard, he could see the bottle of fiery ouzo brought back from holiday by Kayley had been much reduced. Normally they practically had to force Cassandra to drink a glass of even the feeblest table wine.

'What are you doing?'

'Waiting,' she said.

The word didn't register at first. Then it got through. 'Wha – what do you mean?'

She didn't sound overly drunk, but the impact of the ouzo was in her burning eyes. 'Like I said, waiting.'

Stephen grew sober and clammy at the same time, as if the alcohol in his own bloodstream was draining out of his pores. But there was no ducking the question. 'For Kayley?'

'Yes.'

He spoke as urgently as he could manage. 'It's just a story, Cass. Nothing is going to happen.'

We'll see.'

It came to him that there was more than hope on her face. Much closer to expectation.

Cassandra, typically, grew sorry for him. 'Please don't think badly of me, Stevie. It's just a feeling I have. That she's going to come back to us alive and well.' She looked at him. 'It's nothing to do with that stupid monkey's paw thing.' But he knew she was lying.

Thinking back to the story, his brain attempted a befuddled calculation. There had been a time lag between the second wish and the son arriving outside his parents' house, the reason being that he had to walk the two miles from the cemetery. It had only been a couple of days since Cassandra's blunder. Surely it would take much longer than that for Kayley to reach the flat from a secret grave near Oxford? Which meant he had more than enough time to wish her away. But what if the murderer had buried her closer to home?

Why am I even thinking these thoughts? He was still laughing at his lunacy when someone rapped on the front door.

Cassandra lurched to her feet before he could move. 'I'm coming, sweetheart,' she called out, her voice suddenly thick with drink and emotion.

Terrified, Stephen leapt to the mantleshelf. It was almost empty of rubbish, no sign of the monkey's paw. Oh, you silly spring–cleaning bitch, he thought, as he frantically looked around the room. He was deciding whether to go after Cassandra or dive for cover behind the sofa when it occurred to him that she had deliberately hidden it away. He tried to shout out a warning but could manage no more than a dry–mouthed croak.

The rap had become a steady hammering noise. 'You're so impatient!' Cassandra said.

She opened the door.
Then she screamed.

HONEYMOON IN VENICE

We touched down at McCarran in the early evening. The slots were jingling in the concourse and there was even a hint of snow in the air as we waited on a taxi. I just knew it was going to be our best Christmas ever.

We were excited as a couple of kids on the drive into Vegas. Both of us were looking forward to a wonderful second honeymoon (except there hadn't been a first, if you know what I mean). My auntie back home in Duluth had just died and left me a whole heap of money.

'Time for us to go mad, sweeheart,' I had told Carrie.

'Sure is, honeybun!' she'd replied, with the twinkle that always makes me think of her as being nearer to twenty than fifty.

The wedding suite in the Venetian was so big you could get lost in it and Carrie laughed at my joke about needing a sat nav to get from the bathroom to the four–poster bed.

The next day, over breakfast, she kept stealing glances at the table behind me and I could see her pretty face grow more and more flushed.

'That man is staring at me,' she whispered. Before I had a chance to look, her little squeal denoted something even worse.

I think we both got a touch panicky when the stranger suddenly got up and walked the short distance to our table.

'May I introduce myself?' But it sounded more like an order than a request.

We were too flummoxed to speak. People don't normally force their company on strangers in Duluth, especially first thing in the morning.

'Er, yes,' I finally got out.

'Ambrose,' he said. His grip was enough to make me wince. Then he turned to Carrie. 'And this, I guess, is your beautiful lady.' When he bent over to kiss her hand, she looked even more scrambled than our eggs. But I couldn't help noticing something of a sparkle in her eyes.

Already in a grumpy mood because I'd been trying to catch the eye of our waitress without success for several minutes, I muttered, 'I'm Ken Crane. This is my wife, Carrie.'

Like he couldn't even tell I was in a huff, the stranger pulled a chair across from his own table and sat down. 'First time in Vegas?' he asked in a rich baritone voice.

'Yes.'

'Me too.'

When the waitress rushed over to top up our coffees, Ambrose chatted to her like they were old friends.

Carrie, too, started rattling away to him after the first few awkward moments, explaining in her girlish way how we were on our second honeymoon. It didn't take long for me to mellow either, after he said some nice things about my polo shirt. Coming from him, it seemed like a pretty big compliment.

With piercing dark eyes and a deep tan, beautifully dressed in what I supposed was designer gear, our new acquaintance had quite a presence. His manner of speaking alone was worth the price of admission, imposing and somehow old–fashioned, the words rolling off his tongue.

Carrie and me would probably have been flattered to get the time of day off him. So you can imagine how we felt when he invited us to a show at the Riviera. 'I know where to get last–minute tickets,' he explained, with a smile that said, I know where to get *anything*.

I offered to pay our share, but Ambrose refused. 'I can tell you're not a freeloader, Ken,' he said. 'But, believe me, I have money to burn.'

So have I, I wanted to say, thinking about my healthy inheritance. Ambrose caught my eye at that moment, and I could tell we were two men of the world thinking the same thought: it's good to be rich.

At the Riviera that evening we arranged to fly together over the Grand Canyon the next day. Funny, but it didn't seem awkward or strange to be in a threesome on our honeymoon. In fact, we were rather proud to be in his company. It was obvious that lots of people were drawn to him, especially of the female variety.

Carrie liked him for sure, and with anyone else I might have been jealous. But somehow I trusted him. He seemed to be interested in every aspect of our lives. I told him I had worked in the insurance game for over thirty years – 'Sort of semi–retired now, though', with another meaningful man–to–man stare – and collected stamps as my full–time hobby. Carrie soon got onto a favorite subject, her keen interest in the supernatural. We have been irregular churchgoers, but Carrie has always had a strong belief in heaven and hell. Especially hell, she just can't get enough of horror stories.

I could see her really warm to our new friend when he agreed with her that The Omen was the best movie ever made.

We began spending a lot of time with Ambrose. Carrie even wanted the three of us to take a gondola ride together. Everywhere we went, in every hotel resort along the Strip, the people working there knew him by name – cocktail waitresses, croupiers, bartenders. It was a mystery how he had got so well–known in Vegas in such a short space of time. But then, truth be told, everything about our new friend was something of a mystery. For all his great interest in our mundane

existences, he didn't talk much about himself. A look would come into his eyes that stopped us in our tracks. However, that just added to the fascination of the man.

One evening, on our way out to dinner, Carrie shivered a little in spite of her coat. 'You don't expect Vegas to be this cold,' she said.

Ambrose laughed, 'Makes a nice change for me.'

Given his disinclination to discuss his personal affairs, I had been too shy to ask the question before. 'Where you from?' I asked, imagining he was going to say Hawaii or something.

'He just laughed again, a joyous sound that turned the heads of a couple of pretty girls walking past. 'From over the seas and far away.'

He didn't sound like he was from foreign parts, but I kept the thought to myself. Carrie later suggested, as she was was sitting in bed with the latest Stephen King, that he must be working in Saudi Arabia or one of those places, making a fortune out of oil. That would explain his tan and air of affluence.

It was two days before Christmas when Ambrose asked if we would like to try something different. A bit of fun, as he put it. There was a wicked smile on his face that made me feel a trifle uncomfortable, but Carrie seemed only too ready to go along with his plan. For me, it confirmed the change I was beginning to notice in her. Like she wanted to try new things. Things that did not always seem appropriate.

For instance, on an earlier trip downtown Ambrose had talked us into entering an adult video store. 'This is Sin City – live a little!'

I hadn't known where to put my eyes, explicit videos and magazines everywhere, and insisted on leaving when Carrie began to take an interest in something Ambrose called a dildo. Back on the street the pair of them had laughed at my discomfort. Carrie's show of disloyalty hurt somewhat, but Ambrose soon charmed me out of holding a grudge, especially after he insisted on buying me a silk tie that I liked.

But then Ambrose could have talked the birds out of the trees. His voice had an unusual quality, deep and musical, that made it a pleasure just listening to him. Something special about the way he looked at you, too, holding your gaze until you felt you had no choice but to fall in with his ideas.

All in all, we were putty in his hands.

Promising that he was going to give us a night to remember, Ambrose first took us into the Venetian casino. There are no such places in Duluth that I am aware of, so I was surely surprised when my wife took her place at a roulette wheel

as if it was something she had been doing all her life. To my even greater astonishment, she doubled her chips in no time.

'You have the luck of the devil,' Ambrose joked.

Carrie squealed with girlish pleasure. 'This is just *great!*'

Ambrose caught my eye. 'You know what they say, the quiet ones are always the worst.' He clapped me on the back. 'So what are your vices, Ken? What's your weakness?'

I thought about it. 'Stamps, I guess.'

Ambrose laughed. 'I think we can find you something better than that.'

I don't indulge as a rule, but he persuaded me to have another Margarita, and maybe one after that, and next thing I knew we were in a sort of night club. Only it was full of half naked girls, some of them practicing acrobatics on steel poles with guys watching on. The music alone was enough to give you a headache. That heavy rock stuff. I prefer John Denver.

If I hadn't been almost too drunk to stand, in fact, I would have walked straight out. Carrie, on the other hand, in spite of being about the only woman in the place with all her clothes on, seemed to be having the whale of a time. I caught her and Ambrose and her with their heads together at one point, holding what looked like an intimate conversation. How they could hear each other, I don't know.

I was shocked when Ambrose asked if I wanted a private dance from one of the girls. What made it worse was the grin on my dear wife's face as he did so. Of course, I refused to take him up on the offer.

The next morning I finally understood what people mean when they say they feel like death. But Carrie was as chipper as can be, as if our racy new lifestyle agreed with her.

Still upset about their joke in bad taste, I asked, 'What were you and Ambrose talking about last night?'

Perhaps it came out the wrong way, sort of resentful, because Carrie looked hard at me for a second or two and I wondered if we were heading for our first quarrel in twenty–three years of marriage. But then, to my relief, she gave one of her sweet smiles. 'He's such an interesting man, honeybun. He knows so much about the *strangest* things.'

But she wouldn't say any more than that. 'Oh, it's nothing you'd be interested in.'

It was Christmas Eve and I wanted to suggest to her that, just maybe, we could be on our own over the main part of the festive period. Instead I got talked into lunching with Ambrose at a smart restaurant in the MGM Grand. It was the

first time I'd eaten French food and the garlic or something must have disagreed with me because I spent a considerable amount of time in the rest room. They were chatting nine to the dozen when I got back to the table, but Carrie rushed off for some spa treatment before our coffees arrived.

It was the first time me and Ambrose had been on our own together. I tried to think of a tactful way of getting my point across, I didn't want to sound ungrateful. But it was almost like he could see right inside me. 'Guess I'm making a nuisance of myself, Ken. Anyway, I'm going to stay out of your way tomorrow.'

'No, no ...'

He held up one beautifully manicured hand. 'I insist you spend some time alone with that lovely wife of yours. That is my command.' He was smiling as he said it but, do you know, it sounded exactly like that. Friendly enough, but a command.

'What about you, what are you going to do?'

'I'll be fine.' In view of his next words, it seemed right that his smile had something wintry about it. 'I'm not a Christmas person.'

As we were parting, he took two small gift–wrapped packages from the pocket of his expensive trousers. 'For the both of you tomorrow.'

I felt terrible and wondered if Carrie had thought to buy him something. He again seemed to read my mind. 'Tell her not to bother.'

Ambrose smiled when I stuttered my thanks. A funny sort of smile, almost like it wasn't a smile. 'Just call me Santa,' he said.

Carrie went a bit quiet after I told her we wouldn't be seeing Ambrose again until Boxing Day. But she brightened up over dinner that night as I teased her about the surprise present I had bought. Strangely, by that time it was me who was beginning to feel a trifle down. I wondered where Ambrose was – it almost felt like we were missing out on something.

Carrie loved my combined Christmas and honeymoon gift, an eternity ring, one of the most expensive I had been able to find in Duluth. But she chirped even louder when she opened the tiny package from Ambrose. Inside was a cheap–looking chain with a pendant hanging from it. I'd seen enough horror movies with Carrie to recognize the object as a pentagram. 'Ambrose says that everyone in his group wears this. Guess it kind of makes me an honorary member. *Great!*'

'Group?'

'Oh, it's just something he told me. Go on, honeybun, open your present!'

There was a rush to the way she changed the subject that made me wonder if she was hiding some sort of secret. It troubled me somewhat, I have to admit. We

had always told each other everything.

Anyway, I did as she wanted and unwrapped a small square box that held a single postage stamp. 'Wow!' I exclaimed, as I recalled telling Ambrose it was one I had been on the search for.

Carrie hugged me, sharing in my surprised delight. 'Isn't he just the *coolest* man?' she cooed. I'd never heard her use the term before but had to agree.

That evening she finished a whole bottle of red wine by herself (it was another difference in her – in Duluth a small glass over dinner had always been more than sufficient). Having learned my lesson, I stuck to mineral water. Ambrose had earlier rung to wish each of us the best of the season, though he hadn't sounded particularly festive. When I commented on that fact I again sensed that Carrie was holding something back. However, the drink finally loosened her tongue.

'You know I mentioned Ambrose is in a group?'

I was disconcerted to see what could have been a sly look on her normally straightforward face, but even so couldn't resist a little light humour.

'Beatles or Beach Boys?'

It was another painful moment when she didn't even raise a smile. Normally my quips always tickle her funny bone. Anyway, give her her due, she didn't beat about the bush.

'Ambrose hates Christmas Day because he's a black magician.'

I held off the temptation to laugh and say, he's not that tan.

'The group is his cabal. They practice the satanic arts.'

She could have been talking Danish by that time. 'You lost me, sweetheart.'

But she was still gushing. 'He's told me all about it. Isn't it *great*? Fancy *me* knowing a black magician!'

I think it was at that moment, seeing her so overly excited, that I began to wonder if Ambrose was altogether a good influence. She seemed to confirm this with her next words. 'He asked me not to tell you.'

She ignored the hurt that must have shown on my face, and even managed to look proud of herself. 'He says not everyone is so open–minded as me.'

In spite of everything I was already feeling better. After all, she *had* told me. I wanted to ask a whole host of questions but Carrie fell asleep from the wine not long after. As I helped her into bed I noticed she was wearing Ambrose's gift around her neck.

For all her over–indulgence, Carrie looked more beautiful than ever in the morning. But at the same time she seemed a trifle high–strung, even tense, and I almost suggested cancelling the breakfast date we'd fixed up with Ambrose.

The three of us had no sooner sat down, hadn't even ordered, when Carrie blurted out, 'He knows.'

I had no time to be offended by her use of the third person. Ambrose immediately chuckled and clapped me on the back. 'So what do you think, Ken? Think you can live with it?'

Stung by the relief showing on Carrie's face, I tried to keep my tone light. 'Whatever turns you on.'

Ambrose beamed at me. 'Spoken like an old hippy! I knew you weren't as stuffy as you look.' Somehow his smile made up for the insult.

He seemed to go into a shell after that and we finished the meal mostly in silence. As we were about to get up from the table, I was surprised when Ambrose asked Carrie to leave the two of us alone for a moment. It was even more surprising that she meekly agreed to his request.

Ambrose leaned forward confidentially. 'I wanted to speak to you in private, Ken, because I think you are strong enough to bear my news. It goes much deeper than anything I have yet told Carrie.'

I had never seen him look so serious, his eyes fixing me with a gaze that made me feel a touch nervous all of a sudden. But at the same time, truth be told, I was quite looking forward to having a secret of my own.

'I am from the Underworld.'

A picture of Robert di Nero in The Untouchables went through my head.

Ambrose again acted like he was reading my mind. He grew impatient. 'No, I am not a gangster.' Then he laughed in a way that, for some reason, sent a shiver down my spine. 'I'm much worse than that.'

His stare had turned positively hypnotic. 'I am from Hell.'

Thinking about it for a moment, I finally managed to sort of squeak, 'Are you?' I have to admit my reaction wasn't the strongest. But what would you do if someone came out with that over breakfast in the Venetian hotel?

He made it sound like he was telling me about being a member of a country club or something. 'Yes, I am.'

Pulling myself together, I attempted to laugh the whole thing off. 'Yes, that's a good one, Ambrose.' Thinking his joke was actually in very poor taste. On the day following the celebration of our Saviour's birth, after all.

His normally melodious voice turned into an ugly hiss. 'You don't believe me?'

I always try to appreciate the other fellow's point of view. 'No, it's not that. But you must admit that it sounds a trifle ...' I murmured the word in an effort to take the discourtesy out of it. '... crazy.'

Instead of growing even more angry as I'd feared, he gave a sardonic smile. 'Carrie tells me you have watched The Omen with her.'

'Er, that's right.'

He put both hands to his head and then leaned forward. Where he had parted his thick dark hair, I was able to read the number '666'. I think my jaw might have hit the table. But then you don't get to encounter the forces of evil every day of the week in Duluth.

'We will speak again when what I have told you has sunk in.'

He threw down his napkin and stood up. An attractive middle–aged woman at a nearby table followed him with her eyes as he stalked from the room. I remember thinking: it's true what they say, no news is good news.

I rushed back to our room, trying hard to think whether we had given Ambrose our home address. I could hardly believe my story even while it was tumbling out of me. To my horror, instead of screaming that we ought to get on the next plane out of Vegas, Carrie's eyes lit up.

'Isn't that just *great!!!*'

Turns out that one of the things she had discussed with Ambrose behind my back was whether demons could be conjured up by his cabal. He had hinted that it was possible.

'But this is even better!' she squealed, hugging herself.

As I said before, we've been married for more than twenty years. I have always loved her to bits. And yet at that moment, with her almost hysterical show of enthusiasm for the weird and not–so–wonderful, Carrie was scaring the life out of me. I tried arguing with her.

'He's either very evil or a total nutcase. Either way, we ought to get out of here. Now!'

'He is no charlatan. He has the mark of the beast on his head.'

I stared at her. The words could have come straight out of one of the Hammer pictures she loves to watch. When she calmed down a little, I finally managed to get her to talk more rationally. And it was then that she really succeeded in terrifying me.

'Don't you see, honeybun, that this is the most wonderful thing ever to happen to us?' There was sudden scorn in her voice. 'Or do you want to stay in Duluth for the rest of your life, doing ordinary, boring things?'

Give me ordinary and boring every time, I thought. But I couldn't shift her. She had a glassy sort of look in her eyes, and it crossed my mind that Ambrose might have been passing on more than just his satanic notions. I remembered

her saying one time that she had always wondered what marijuana tasted like. I sniffed the air, but caught nothing except her perfume.

When the phone rang Carrie rushed to answer and I could tell from her excitement that it was Ambrose. After a murmured conversation she turned to me. 'The master has summoned you.'

The words were a shock, of course, but I think the satisfaction on her face was the real body blow. Like she was relishing every moment. I asked myself if I had ever really known her.

As I went off to what felt like my doom, the sensation of being in a Dracula movie deepened when she called out from the door, 'He will make you see. As I now see.'

Ambrose was waiting for me in his room. I had a fleeting moment of pleasure that it was a lot smaller than ours. He came straight to the point.

'So do you agree to become a follower?'

I wanted to shout out, Never, but somehow it stuck in my throat. I wondered if pleading that I had a delicate stomach would get me off the hook. A squeamish satanist, it didn't seem right. After all, I much preferred reading stamp catalogs to Carrie's novels and tend to sit through horror movies with my eyes closed a lot of the time. On the other hand, Carrie often talked about her childhood dream of working in an operating theater. And she had always taken what I considered to be a morbid interest in road kill. We were very different people.

And yet I couldn't abandon her to him. Love is saying sorry to the devil, I decided. You can't have her.

My courageous stand came out as, 'Please, please, I'll do anything if you let us go. *Pleeease*.'

'Call me master,' he said coldly.

'*Pleeease*, master.'

He regarded me with contempt. 'I wonder if such a pathetic creature is worthy of the honour I wish to bestow.'

I brightened. 'That's right, master, I am not worthy.'

By now his gaze was like a laser. 'But what can you give me in return for not taking your wretched soul?'

'Anything. Everything I have.'

'All your worldly goods?'

I had a moment of hesitation. It's not fair, I thought, I've only just come into my money. Then I thought of Carrie. 'Yes, but only if my wife comes with me.'

Ambrose pondered for a moment. And then his eyes turned crafty. 'What if

I said that is not possible?'

I summoned up defiance from somewhere. 'Then it's no deal.'

He pondered some more. 'OK.'

In the end, I agreed to give him everything in my savings account, close on half a million.

'A wire transfer,' Ambrose ordered. 'I never accept cheques.'

When I got back to our room after arranging the transfer, I had to stall Carrie. I told her that we wouldn't be seeing Ambrose for a while and could at once see the mistrust on her face. Luckily, the phone rang at that moment. 'It's the master,' Carrie whispered, 'calling from McCarran.' I hoped he was telling her the story we had agreed.

She put the phone down with a sigh of resignation. 'The master has to go away on urgent business. He said we should go back home and await his call.'

The phone rang again. It was for me this time, and the silky chuckle was back in Ambrose's voice. 'I congratulate you, Ken. Some men's weakness is other women. Yours is your wife. Anyway, please forgive me for not saying it before. Happy New Year.'

I thought the next few weeks were going to be a nightmare, with Carrie fretting herself to death over why the master hadn't called. But in fact she was restored to her normal carefree self after no more than twenty–four hours back in Duluth. It was like she had come out of a trance.

I soon began to suspect that that was exactly what had happened.

When I finally went to the police, they told me all about Ambrose (or Dominic or Mario, he changed his name a lot). The almost magical way he could bend people, and especially women, to his will. It seems he had trained as a hypnotherapist. Of course, it wasn't the first time he'd got away with a load of someone else's money. The guys from the FBI really enjoyed our story. 'Wow, the guy is always coming up with new scams,' one of them said, a note of admiration in his voice. 'Stencilling his head. Brilliant!'

'Just call me Santa,' the other smirked. 'Respect!'

They laughed out loud when I told them about Ambrose coming from Hell.

Turns out he was from somewhere in Idaho.

THE MAN WHO COULD HAVE CHANGED HISTORY

That part of my life sometimes seems like an illusion from an hallucinogenic past. But then I remember that I never took drugs, even in those days. No, it actually happened. I was there. And I need to tell the story before I die. Old man Pallister was in his seventies at the time. I'm catching up fast.

However, I was a young man in the legendary Sixties. My wife and kids and grandkids were in the future, together with my safe but boring career in health and safety, my retirement. As the cliche goes: I could have done anything, been anyone.

Jim Amiss, who was my flatmate in far–away Swinging London, certainly intended to go places, one way or another. We shared the ground floor of a spacious but rather rundown townhouse off the Finchley Road. Old man Pallister was our landlord and lived on his own in the flat upstairs.

I didn't know Jim at all when we moved in together; we had simply answered the same advertisment for lodgings. I was a junior civil servant and Jim was a trainee solicitor. Neither of us had a lot of cash, so going halves made sense.

I suppose I was always a bit in awe of my new flatmate. He was from Brighton or Hove, anyway, somewhere extremely middle–class and sophisticated (or so it seemed to me at the time). I, on the other hand, had been brought up in a village in industrial South Wales, with a postman for a father. In truth, I must have been as exotic to him as he was to me.

It wasn't just Jim. To tell the truth, I found almost everything about London intimidating in those early days. And that included old man Pallister.

As I said, he must have been well into his seventies, with thick white hair and a considerable frame that had long been running to fat. But he looked as if he could still handle himself in a fight. A massive jaw and large hands added to that impression. He was a man of few words, who at first seemed to communicate in nothing but grunts.

I was homesick, I admit, and couldn't seem to settle at all. My office was full of middle–aged and mostly married people. To make matters worse, Jim was hardly ever at home, which meant I was on my own most evenings. On my own, that is, but for the surly geriatric bruiser in the flat upstairs. All in all, I was most definitely not warming to my new life.

And then, one morning, old man Pallister actually spoke to me. It was nothing substantial, some comment about the nice weather, the usual sort of British stuff. Pathetic, I know, but the gesture was so welcome that it cheered me up for the rest of the day.

Things were bound to get easier, of course, as I grew accustomed to the big city. But that one cursory exchange seemed like a breakthrough; it felt almost as if the old man was encouraging me to be less of a rabbit in the headlights. After getting to know some people in the office, I even began to develop a modest social life.

And old man Pallister became part of it.

One day we bumped into each other in the newsagents, and I saw he was buying a history magazine. He must have sensed my interest. 'Like this sort of stuff, do you?'

His tones were no–nonsense, demanding a reply. Startled by the unexpectedness of the enquiry, I fumbled for a response that didn't sound too banal.

I failed. 'Um, yes. I find it ... um, interesting.'

'Favour any particular period?'

The words were barked in a way that had me thinking of anglepoise lamps and rubber truncheons. I hurriedly said, 'Oh, definitely the modern stuff. Europe between the wars.'

'Any particular country?'

With Gestapo interrogation techniques still in mind, I relished the irony of my reply. 'Germany.'

To my surprise, he looked at me with approval. 'Well done,' he said.

Relieved not to find myself being hauled back to my cell, I gave what must have been a particularly stupid grin. The old man didn't seem to mind. He even clapped me on the shoulder, causing my knees to buckle, before marching out of the shop with swinging arms, military–style.

'We'll talk some more,' he called back to me.

To add to the novelty value of the day, Jim stayed at home that evening and even cooked for both of us (something better than I normally ate, I'm sure). After dinner, we had what must have been almost our first real conversation. My flatmate did most of the talking, in a smooth and supremely confident voice, and I got the impression he liked listening to himself.

He told me about his girlfriend. 'Virgina is the most wonderful person. Perfect for me.'

It turned out, though, that politics was his real love. He was already some sort of official in the local Young Conservatives and had big plans for the future.

'I see myself in Parliament in ten years time,' he said, sounding almost absurdly sure of himself. 'After that, who knows? A cabinet post.'

A measured pause, as if to give me time to take in the full significance of his words. ‘Perhaps the man in charge.’

As someone who had problems thinking about the next day, I was impressed by the extent of his vision. However, I was less struck by his political principles. Public schools and fox hunting were good; trade unions and what he called ‘hippy behaviour’ were bad. He made Margaret Thatcher sound like a social worker.

I soon realised that arguing was a waste of time; he contemptuously swatted aside every one of my counterthrusts. Even worse, his silky self–confidence was seductive enough to put one or two doubts in my head. He was the sort of person who could say white was black, and have you wondering for a moment about the colour of snow. We eventually agreed to disagree, but I could tell Jim wasn’t best pleased by my resistance to his values.

Normal service was resumed, and I hardly saw him for the rest of the week. One morning, however, I bumped into old man Pallister in the communal hallway. He looked pleased to see me.

‘Why don’t you come up for tea tonight? Take a gander at my library.’

I was gobsmacked before the word had even been invented. I also remember being a bit worried by the thought of being alone with an old bachelor in his flat. Even forty odd years ago I was cynical enough to wonder about his motives.

Perhaps he guessed my unease, his voice turning slightly strained. ‘How about your friend? Does he like history, too?’

‘Well, he isn’t around a lot.’

‘Yes, I did notice. Anyway, the invitation stands.’

There was less of a rasp than usual, and it crossed my mind that he was deliberately softening his tone to get me to accept. Perhaps he’s lonely, I told myself. Then a much more depressing thought: perhaps he thinks *I’m* lonely. For a moment, I considered telling him I was going out. But I have never been a good liar.

‘OK,’ I said.

His place was much more substantially furnished than ours, but in a gloomy, Gothic sort of way, with mahogany sideboards and washed–out Oriental rugs everywhere. Two of the walls in the living room were hidden by a vast array of books, perhaps thousands of faded spines crammed onto shelves.

Old man Pallister was like a proud parent. It was the first time I had seen him properly smile.

‘What do you think?’

Another of my feeble replies. ‘Very nice.’

The old man seemed unperturbed by my underwhelming reaction, gesturing towards the shelves. ‘Take a closer look.’

I could tell at a glance that most of the books were not at all new, and it soon became obvious that the majority were history–related. I also noticed that many were in German.

The old man anticipated my question. ‘I lived there for several years. Before the war. The second one.’

My interest was picking up, though it did little to enhance my eloquence. ‘Really?’ I said.

Suspecting that the old man was already regretting his invite to such an inarticulate ingrate, I attempted to recover some lost ground as we drank muddy tea and scoffed the surprisingly dainty sandwiches he had prepared.

‘What were you doing in Germany?’

‘Oh, I was working there. You know, this and that.’

There was a half–hesitant, half–dying–to–tell look on his craggy face. My own thoughts probably involved the hope that his story wasn’t going to be too boring.

He spoke in a lethargic mutter at first, as if he was still quite reluctant to let it out. ‘I was doing some official stuff for the government. Ours, I mean. In Munich a few years after the war. The first lot, that is.’

I must have looked confused.

‘The Somme, Verdun.’ He lifted an imaginary rifle. ‘Bang, bang.’

We laughed together, and that seemed to relax us both.

Wanting to impress on him that I had some insider knowledge on the workings of the British Government, I asked, ‘So you were attached to the consulate in Munich?’

‘Only indirectly.’

Seeing that he was losing me again, his voice speeded up.

‘Let’s just say I worked for another government agency. Keeping an eye on the Germans, you know.’ The barest pause. ‘In fact, I suppose you could say I was a spy.’

That got rid of any worries about being bored.

‘Wow!’

‘Yes, the place had had the lot by then, of course – attempted revolution, failed coups, hyper–inflation, the absolute lot. There were some very unsavoury characters around, looking to change the status quo. Get rid of Weimar, restore the country to its previous greatness by every possible means. Our lords and masters in

Whitehall were already getting a trifle nervous about the situation. Hence my presence out there.'

'It must have been very exciting.'

His eyes drilled through me. 'I absolutely know what you're thinking. James Bond. 007. Licenced to kill.' Then he was practically shouting. 'Bull! I only wish I had been!'

As I sat like a small child who had just received a stern lecture for no reason that he could comprehend, the old man quickly regained his composure. 'No, my cover was being a business type. Export, import, you know. But it enabled me to mix with the locals, get the gen on things.'

He made a gesture that seemed to dismiss everything about his past. 'Anyway, that was then and this is now. Had enough to eat, have you?'

We chatted a bit more about history in general, but I could see the old man was tired. After I made my excuses, he loaned me a couple of books about the inter–war years. As I was going down the stairs, he called out, 'That friend of yours ...'

'Jim?'

'Yes, Jim. What does he do?'

'He's training to be a solicitor. But he wants to be a politician.'

His voice was even more brusque than usual. 'Is that right?' A hard stare, before he closed the door.

I was reminded of that moment when Jim spent one of his rare evenings at home.

'That bloke Pallister is weird, don't you think?' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'The way he never actually speaks, just grunts. I get the distinct impression he doesn't like me.'

I was about to defend our landlord when it occurred to me that I'd never told Jim about my trip upstairs. Somehow it didn't seem the right time to mention it.

'I haven't really noticed.'

But I couldn't help recalling the old man's look of distaste. You're absolutely right, Jim, I thought. He doesn't like you.

A few days later Jim brought his girlfriend back to the flat. Virginia was tall and attractive and sounded very middle–class to my untrained ear. Jim smarmed all over her, and she looked embarrassed when he began to boast that her old man was someone fairly senior in the Conservative party. But it was obvious she adored him.

Later on, he had another go at converting me to his politics. The polished voice was again abundant with conviction, and again triggered the occasional traitorous thought (I remember, for instance, not wanting to agree with him about bringing back the death penalty for child killers). But I stuck to the line that Labour was dragging the country, finally, into the modern world. He didn't like that at all. As he shepherded Virginia to his bedroom, he gave me a look that wasn't far off loathing.

Then old man Pallister asked me upstairs again. This time there was no pretence of inviting my flatmate. That was fine with me.

Over sandwiches and cupcakes, it became clear that my host and landlord was in a ruminative mood. He took hold of one of the small shop–bought cakes in his leathery paw.

'Not quite up to South German standards,' he said.

He grew even more reflective. 'The Cafe Heck, now that was the place for pastries. The strudels there ... they would have raised the dead.' A sigh. 'Yes, the dead.'

The hum of traffic and a loud burst of rock music drifted through the wondow, but the old man gave the impression of being a long way from 1960s London. He stared over my shoulder until I began to feel uncomfortable.

'The Cafe Heck?'

'YES, THE CAFE HECK! ARE YOU STUPID,BOY?'

I must have jumped, or turned pale or something, because he immediately looked apologetic and rushed to fill my teacup. 'I'm so sorry, my boy. You must excuse me. It's just that some days ... the memories ...'

The cup and saucer rattled in his big hand.

Too scared to use my trap again for anything but imbibing brown liquid, I waited for him to carry on. When he finally spoke, the vigorous but even tones told me he was fully back in the present.

'It's something you have yet to learn – at least I hope so, for your sake – but there are moments in one's life that keep coming back. No matter how much you try to forget them.'

His eyes were so penetrating that I had to look away. 'And I had one of those moments in Munich in 1923.'

Another silence.

'I have told very few people what I am about to tell you, my boy. In fact, no–one in the past thirty years. However, something has happened that impels me to tell it one last time.'

I felt flattered and puzzled in about equal measure. Why me then? I wanted to ask him.

He immediately answered my unspoken question. 'I have either lost or lost contact with all my old friends. There is no–one left to tell.'

An examination of my face that made me feel guilty for some reason. 'And you said you like history.'

I got my mouth back in gear. 'I do.' I said.

His next remark was so astonishing that it made me want to laugh.

'I could have changed the whole course of the twentieth century, you know.'

I was still amazed and amused.

'Yes, I know what you're thinking. Crazy old man.'

'No – no, not at all.'

'But every word I am about to tell you is the truth. It was June or July, I think. I'd bumped into him a few times before, in the Cafe Heck or the Osteria Bavaria, places like that. By God, the bastard could pack away the sweet stuff! He was always surrounded by a bunch of cronies, of course.'

He must have seen the light dawning.

'Yes, Hitler,' he said.

He pointed to the hundreds of tattered hardbacks on their shelves. 'Not a word about it in any of those, of course. But it happened.'

His voice picked up. 'Anyway, I liked strolling in the park when I lived in Munich.' A rueful bark. 'Must have been trying to escape into a more peaceful world.'

He squared his broad shoulders before going on.

'It was on one of those walks – I think it was in the Hofgarten – that I saw the man standing on his own. The cronies were a little way off for once. He was banging away at the branches of a tree, you know, with a walking stick. Like this.' He jerked one arm several times. 'Leaves were flying everywhere. As if he was *murdering* that tree. And something told me he would eventually do the same to people – many, many people. The path took me right past him. As I said, I was no James Bond. But I sometimes carried a gun with me, official issue, Munich wasn't always the safest place for foreigners in those days. I caught hold of it in my pocket. And that was the moment ...'

A crackling noise in his chest.

'That was the moment I could have changed history.'

The seconds ticked by. If I could have found my voice, I wouldn't have known what to say.

THE MAN WHO COULD HAVE CHANGED HISTORY

'He was nothing much to look at, a commonplace little man. But he seemed to give off this ... this aura. It's the only way to describe it. It was as if I could almost *smell* the evil coming off him. Only two people in my life have ever made me feel that way.'

He studied my face, which must have resembled one big question mark by then. 'Yes, I know what you're thinking. Why didn't he shoot the blighter. Do the world a favour. Right?'

'Ye – yes.'

'I wish I knew. Maybe it was my British sense of fair play, not wanting to attack an unarmed man. Or perhaps another voice was telling me not to trust my instinct about him.'

He braced himself again.

'Finally, we come to what is probably the unvarnished truth. Plain funk. His cronies would have shot me down like a dog. And if they hadn't, there was the prospect of spending the rest of my days in a German prison.'

He sighed heavily. 'I had a wife then, you know.'

A depressed silence, followed by a little sign for me to leave. But I was curious.

'Two people, you said.'

He grew angry. 'I don't want to talk any more!'

His still–strong arms propelled me to the door. When I glanced back on my way down the stairs, he was staring at me in a way that looked half demented, half fearful.

I was still thinking about that look when Jim brought his new girlfriend to the flat. He was obviously too pleased with himself to carry any grudge against me.

'What's happened to Virginia?' I whispered as he prepared coffee in our poky kitchen.

He looked over his shoulder to the living room. 'Oh, this one is a better bet,' he muttered.

Her name was Wendy, and I found myself comparing her unfavourably with her predecessor. For a start, she was much shorter, with frizzy hair and teeth that needed straightening. And yet Jim fawned over her as if she was some kind of Greek goddess. He soon dropped into the conversation that she had gone to school with minor royalty and that her father – his voice going all reverential – was in the shadow cabinet.

As I wandered off to bed as soon as possible – anything to avoid more politics – I wondered what the word was for a man who seemed to be sleeping his way to the top.

Virginia came to the door a few days later and demanded to see Jim. When I said he wasn't in, she burst into tears. I wanted to comfort her, even ask her out, but was too shy and embarrassed.

'Tell him to call me. *Please*,' she said.

The next morning I encountered old man Pallister for the first time in almost a week. His parting stare at our last meeting hadn't ceased to puzzle and trouble me. However, since I knew I rivalled Bambi's mother for being evil, the easiest option seemed to be to dismiss him as some sort of lunatic. That only left the awkward business of talking to him again.

To my surprise, however, he looked genuinely pleased to see me, without a trace of apprehension on his lined face. Not my aura then, I decided with some relief.

He studied me for a moment. 'Something bothering you?'

I had noticed it before, how his intuition was able to pick up on my feelings. Virginia was still on my mind, to be honest, and my missed opportunity (I know, but young men can be totally selfish).

'Nothing,' I said.

'Is it your flatmate?'

The sharp enquiry in his voice triggered off my own sixth sense. 'Jim?'

'Yes.'

'You're kidding!'

'No.'

We stared at each other, until the absurdity of his claim finally got the better of me.

'You must admit it takes a bit of getting used to. Jim as a second Hitler. He'll have to grow a funny moustache!'

My weak joke was wasted.

'This is where my story ends,' he said.

I hesitated. He gave a nod, as if inviting me to ask the question. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that it's as if everything I have done or not done has brought me to this point. Confronting evil. Again.'

The anger on his face was making me nervous. And when his hands clenched into fists, I glanced at my watch.

'I have to go, I'm afraid. Late for work ... you know.'

A glare that had me flinching. 'Yes, boy. Run for your life. RUN!'

I ran for my life.

Uneasy about seeing the old man again, I went for a bolstering drink before returning home. To my surprise, Jim was in his bedroom; I could hear him shouting. A female voice seemed to be pleading with him. I was keeping a low profile in the kitchen, preparing my tea, when there was a loud shriek and someone rushed from the flat. The front door slammed. Moments later, Jim sauntered out of his room, looking very cool for someone who had just been in a heated argument.

I had already smelled her perfume in the air.

'Virginia,' I said.

'Yes,' he said, with an insufferably smug grin. 'I've finally managed to get rid of her.'

I had planned to warn him about the old man's weird ideas, his animosity, perhaps even mention the aura (a big perhaps). But his callousness – and my jealousy – drove any such notions out of my head. Serves you right if he does thump you, I thought.

The next morning Jim was the first to leave for work, strolling without a care towards the tube station as I watched through the front window. Not long after, old man Pallister emerged from the house and began a purposeful stride up the same road, arms swinging, shoulders back, as if he had an uptempo military march playing in his head.

When I arrived at the tube station about fifteen minutes later, a huge crowd was milling around in the street outside.

'There's been an accident,' I heard someone say. 'A bloke has fallen on the track.'

Somehow I didn't need to ask if he was young or old.

Not long after, old man Pallister gave himself up at our local police station. He admitted to pushing one of his lodgers from the platform, directly into the path of an oncoming train. But then he clammed up totally.

A search of his flat revealed nothing even remotely incriminating except for a note which read, 'I have to do it. I can't let it happen a second time.'

At his trial, it emerged that the old man's story had been true, or at least the part about working in Munich in the 1920s. But he still refused to say anything in his defence, or indeed at all, and was found guilty of manslaughter due to diminished responsibility. He was eventually sent to what in those days was called a mental institution. I tried to get in touch for a while, but my letters were always returned unopened. I never saw or heard from him again.

The police questioned me at the time, of course. He disliked Jim intensely, I informed them, but I had no idea why. Not a peep about Hitler and the aura. I like

to think I kept silent out of loyalty to the old man. But I was probably just worried about being tarred as another nutter.

And that's the story.

As I said, it sometimes feels as if it never happened. Especially when I see them in flashback. Jim is often wearing a funny little moustache.